

# *THE WARS OF ZEGANDARIA*

*A · J · MASTER*





**CONTENTS:**

**CHAPTER ONE: THE MARCH.....5**

**CHAPTER TWO: THE VISION.....38**

**CHAPTER THREE: THE GENERAL.....48**

**CHAPTER FOUR: THE COSMIC SECOND RING.....61**

**CHAPTER FIVE: THE SECRET ROOM.....66**

**CHAPTER SIX: ENNIO HAMMER.....91**

**CHAPTER SEVEN: DIOMED BASE.....99**

**CHAPTER EIGHT: LABOUR COLONY 206.....120**

**CHAPTER NINE: ENSARIAN.....153**

**CHAPTER TEN: RODWELL.....175**

**CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE NAVY.....192**

**CHAPTER TWELVE: HANS.....211**

**CHAPTER THIRTEEN: VICTORY.....218**

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: KEITH.....	231
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE POLIS.....	240
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: ELOHY.....	247
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: BECKY.....	255
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: GORDON.....	263
CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE CRAZIES.....	274
CHAPTER TWENTY: KIER ZOH.....	283
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: DOOM.....	308
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ZORIN.....	316
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: EMZIROU.....	323
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: A NEW REALITY.....	333
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: LEAVING.....	356
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: THE CHASE.....	365
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE CYCLO TO.....	376
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE SWARM.....	383
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: IN THE FOREST.....	392

CHAPTER THIRTY: THE RECKONING.....	399
------------------------------------	-----

EPILOGUE.....	407
---------------	-----

## CHAPTER ONE: THE MARCH

THIS MAN WAS DIFFERENT. ALTHOUGH AT FIRST GLANCE HE LOOKED LIKE THE OTHERS, HE WAS NOT LIKE THEM. HE COULD NOT CRY. NOT ONCE IN HIS LIFE HAD HE DONE SO. NOT EVEN WHEN HE HELD THE COOLING BODY OF HIS COMMANDER, GENERAL JACOB WALLACE, IN HIS ARMS. THAT HAD HAPPENED AT THE FAMOUS BATTLE OF XANDERAR, WHERE THE HUMAN ALLIANCE TROOPS HAD CLASHED. 'A GREAT MIRACLE' SOME BIASED PERSON MIGHT SAY, BUT MIRACLE OR NO MIRACLE, IT REMAINED A FACT. NO ONE HAD BEEN ABLE TO EXPLAIN THIS DISTINGUISHING FEATURE OF THE STRANGE MAN- WHETHER IT WAS CONGENITAL, ACQUIRED, A DISEASE, A SIGN OF INSENSIBILITY, OR SOMETHING ELSE. PERHAPS IT WAS EACH OF THESE THINGS SEPARATELY, OR PERHAPS IT WAS SOME STRANGE MIXTURE OF THE ABOVE. STILL, THERE HAD TO BE SOME EXPLANATION, OR AT LEAST A SEMBLANCE OF AN EXPLANATION, AND MAYBE NOT? AFTER ALL, WHO NEEDED IT?

MAYBE EVERYONE! IT WAS NO COINCIDENCE, THEREFORE, THAT THE GENERAL HAD SENT HIM ON A SECRET MISSION DESPITE HIS LOW RANK, FOR HE HAD BEEN IMPRESSED BY HIS EXTRAORDINARY COOLNESS AND CONCENTRATION ON THE TASK AT HAND FROM THE VERY FIRST DAYS. AND THAT, AFTER ALL, WAS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING ON THE BATTLEFIELD, WHERE AN ERRANT BULLET COULD CRACK YOUR SKULL. ALMOST ALL HIS BATTLE COMRADES WERE KILLED, YET HE DID NOT SHED A SINGLE TEAR. NOT BECAUSE THEY HADN'T SHARED EVERYTHING OVER THE PAST YEARS, BUT BECAUSE AN ORDER WAS AN ORDER. AN ORDER - CLEAR AND FIRM. AND VITAL. AN ORDER YOU COULDN'T DISOBEY. AND HE KNEW THAT VERY WELL.

AT THE MOMENT, THIS MAN WAS WALKING LIKE A BUM THROUGH THE CROWD SWARMING AROUND THE SUPPOSED APPROACHES TO ULTRA CITY, THE LAST BASTION THAT KEPT HUMAN CIVILIZATION ALIVE. THE LAND HAD LONG SINCE BEEN TURNED INTO A DESERT, OR RATHER INTO SOMETHING BETWEEN UTTERLY DESOLATE REGIONS AND SEMI-DESERT AREAS, WHERE HERE AND THERE WERE OASES IN WHICH THE LAST SPARKS OF INTELLIGENT LIFE STILL SMOULDERED. THE PEOPLE HAD LONG FORGOTTEN WHAT YEAR IT WAS, AND IT DIDN'T MATTER SO MUCH ANYMORE. WHAT WAS MORE IMPORTANT WAS THAT ALMOST ALL THE RAW MATERIALS ON THE PLANET WERE EXHAUSTED, CLEAN DRINKING WATER WAS SCARCE, AND FOOD, REAL FOOD, WAS FOR SOME JUST A MIRAGE BEFORE WHICH THEY LICKED THEIR LIPS HELPLESSLY AS THEY WALKED AIMLESSLY IN THE WILDERNESS.

IN FACT, ULTRA CITY WAS A VAST COMPLEX WHOSE ENTRANCES, OR PERHAPS MORE ACCURATELY APPROACHES, WERE LOCATED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ZEGARAI MOUNTAINS, EAST OF UBUNDER. IT WAS A PLACE THAT WAS PRACTICALLY INACCESSIBLE EVEN AS A MERE POINT OF APPROACH, AND EVEN MORE SO THAT THE UNTRAINED EYE WOULD HARDLY HAVE DISCERNED ANY SIGNS OF LIFE HERE. VIRTUALLY NONE OF THE NEWCOMERS WERE FAMILIAR WITH THE EXACT DIMENSIONS OF THIS CITY-STATE, WHICH STILL OFFERED SOME HOPE OF SURVIVAL FOR HUMANITY. UBUNDER, THEY CALLED THE EASTERN PART OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA, WHICH HUMANS HAD COLONIZED IN THE NOT-SO-DISTANT PAST, BUT WHICH, DUE TO EXCESSIVE HUMAN GREED AND RECKLESSNESS, HAD BEEN ALMOST COMPLETELY RUINED AND DEVASTATED IN A RELATIVELY SHORT PERIOD OF TIME.

ALL THAT COULD BE READ ON THE TORTURED FACES OF THE STRANGERS WAS FATIGUE AND SOME FEELING RESEMBLING BOREDOM WITH THE 'NEED' TO LIVE, THEY LOOKED LIKE A HERD OF TORMENTED ANIMALS THAT HAD GONE IN SEARCH OF SALVATION FROM THE HARSH ZEGANDARIAN SUN, WHICH WITH PROLONGED EXPOSURE INFLICTED SLIGHT BURNS ON THE SURFACE OF THE SKIN THAT DID NOT HEAL FOR DAYS. BUT AS THE SAYING GOES - 'HOPE DIES LAST'. THEY WERE DRIVEN LESS BY AN INSTINCT TO LIVE THAN

BY A HERD SENSE OF BELONGING TO THE REST. YET HERE AND THERE AMONG THE CROWD GLIMMERED INDIVIDUAL CLEARER SILHOUETTES THAT STOOD OUT MORE VIVIDLY AGAINST THE GENERAL IMPERSONAL AND GREY BACKGROUND. ONE WAS THAT OF A YOUNG EX-MILITARY MAN, WHO WORE A UNIFORM THAT, THOUGH A LITTLE WORN, WAS STILL STURDY AND FIT HIM WELL ENOUGH NOT TO LOOK GROTESQUE LIKE MUCH OF THE CROWD, WHO WERE DRESSED IN RAGS RATHER THAN NORMAL CLOTHES. NORMALITY?! IN FACT, THAT WORD HAD LOST ITS MEANING SO LONG AGO THAT IT WAS DIFFICULT TO DETERMINE ITS MEANING. LIFE HAD BEEN REDUCED TO A DAY-TO-DAY THOUGHT, AND SOMETIMES FOR MUCH LESS. NO ONE KNEW WHETHER, THE STEP HE TOOK AT ANY MOMENT, WOULD NOT BE HIS LAST. PARADOXICALLY, OR PERHAPS QUITE NATURALLY, THE WORLD HAD STRUCK BACK AT THE 'BLOW' OF THE HUMAN RACE, AND AS IT WAS RUINING IT, SO WAS IT.

MARK LENNER, THAT WAS THE MILITARY MAN'S REAL NAME, STRODE ALONG QUITE CONFIDENTLY, THOUGH IT WOULD BE FAIR TO ADMIT THAT THE GENERAL DISCORDANT CHORUS OF HUMAN MOANS, GRUNTS AND SO ON INEVITABLY HAD SOME EFFECT ON HIM. SLIGHTLY PARADOXICALLY, THE FORMER PRIVATE WAS NOW IN THE ROLE OF LEADER, A SORT OF 'GENERAL' OF THIS ENTIRE 'ARMY', AS IT WOULD BE RATHER CURTLY TO CALL THE DRIBBLERS STRIDING ACROSS THE PLANET'S DRY SURFACE. STILL, MILITARY TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE HAD THEIR SAY, AND HE MAINTAINED A COMPARATIVELY SLOW BUT FIRM AND MEASURED PACE TO HIS PROGRESS, MUCH LIKE A PROFESSIONAL CLIMBER MIGHT WISH TO KEEP HIS BREATH LONGER IN CASE HE WAS NEEDED AT SOME LATER BUT VITAL STAGE.

IN ORDER THAT THEY MIGHT YET HAVE SOME PROTECTION FROM THE SCORCHING ZEGANDARIAN RAYS, THEY HAD WRAPPED OVER THEIR BATTLE HELMETS A SPECIAL MATERIAL, CALLED QUIZON, USED CHIEFLY FOR MAKING MARCHING TENTS FOR THE INFANTRY, ON ACCOUNT OF ITS STRENGTH, MOISTURE-PROOFNESS, AND HEAT-PROOFNESS. BUT THE MAIN REASON THEY DID NOT RELY ON THE BUILT-IN COOLING SYSTEM OF THEIR SPACESUITS WAS THE INSUFFICIENT AMOUNT OF ENERGY THAT WAS SORELY NEEDED TO

MAINTAIN THEIR RESPIRATORY FUNCTIONS, AS THE OXYGEN CONTENT OF THE PLANET WAS RELATIVELY LOW. NOT THAT A MAN LEFT WITHOUT A SPACESUIT WOULD NECESSARILY DIE IMMEDIATELY, BUT HIS BREATHING WOULD BECOME CONSIDERABLY MORE DIFFICULT, AND IF HE STILL DIDN'T GET AT LEAST A RESPIRATOR WITHIN A FEW HOURS, HE WOULD START TO SUFFOCATE LITTLE BY LITTLE. AS A MATTER OF FACT, THE TEMPERATURE OF THE PLANET DURING THE DAY COULD REACH UP TO ABOUT 60 DEGREES, BUT AT NIGHT IT WOULD GET QUITE COLD AND TEMPERATURES COULD DROP TO -30. THE REASON FOR THIS LAY IN THE SLIGHTLY ECCENTRIC TILT OF THE PLANET, AND THE REMOTENESS OF ITS SUN.

APART FROM THE SCARCITY OF FOOD AND CLEAN DRINKING WATER, THE DANGER TO HUMANS CAME NOT ONLY FROM THE ABRUPT CLIMATIC FLUCTUATIONS, BUT ALSO FROM THE PRESENCE OF CREATURES CALLED GUARRONS, WHICH WERE LARGE HUMANOID LIZARDS WITH RELATIVELY ADVANCED INTELLIGENCE, BUT CONSIDERABLY BETTER ADAPTED THAN HUMANS TO THE EXTREME ENVIRONMENT. NO ONE KNEW WHERE THEY HAD COME FROM. ALL SORTS OF LEGENDS HAD BEEN TOLD ABOUT THEM SINCE THE TIME WHEN MIDRIEL WAS KING OF THE HUMAN ALLIANCE. BUT ACCORDING TO SOME RUMORS, THEY WERE ACTUALLY MUCH MORE ANCIENT. THERE WAS NO ONE TO CONFIRM THESE RUMORS ANYWAY, AS KING MIDRIEL HAD REIGNED OVER 1000 ZEGANDARIAN YEARS AGO, SO ANY TALES OF THIS NATURE REMAINED PRACTICALLY IN THE REALM OF CONJECTURE.

THE MARCH, OR TREK AS IT WOULD BE MORE APTLY CALLED, FOR THE SAKE OF MOVING FROM POINT TO POINT, WITH SOMETHING GOING WRONG AT ANY MOMENT AND THE CARAVAN PERISHING, WAS NOW IN ITS TENTH DAY. THEY WERE FORCED TO DRAG THEMSELVES LITERALLY LIKE DOGS BECAUSE THE SPEEDER WAS BECOMING USELESS WITHOUT FUEL. AND THE FUEL HAD TO BE SAVED FOR FAR MORE PRESSING NEEDS, SUCH AS KEEPING THE GUAROONS AT BAY, WHO FOR WHO KNOWS WHAT REASON HAD BECOME CONSIDERABLY MORE AGGRESSIVE THAN BEFORE. APPARENTLY THEY SNIFFED THAT THE HUMAN RACE WAS SLOWLY BUT SURELY FADING, AND THEIR



HOUR TO RULE THIS PLANET SINGLE-HANDEDLY AS BEFORE HAD STRUCK.

BUT EVEN THE GUARRONS WERE NOT THE MAIN REASON FOR THE EXHAUSTING JOURNEY MARK, ALONG WITH PAUL ZOLSKY, HAD BEEN FORCED TO UNDERTAKE. THE TWO HAD SERVED IN THE ELITE ROYAL COMBAT UNITS. ONE AS AN INFANTRYMAN AND THE OTHER AS A SNIPER. THE REAL REASON FOR THE RAPID DEPLETION OF RESOURCES WAS THE CONFLICTS BETWEEN THE EASTERN PART OF THE PLANET, UBUNDER, AND THE WESTERN PART, CALLED ELOHY. THE CLASHES WERE NATURALLY DRIVEN BY THE LUST FOR POWER OF THE RESPECTIVE LEADERS OF THE EAST AND THE WEST, CLEVERLY DRESSED UP IN A COMPLEX TANGLE OF IDEOLOGICAL FABRICATIONS, WHICH, HOWEVER, THE MASSES AT FIRST BLINDLY BELIEVED IN, BECAUSE THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE TO BELIEVE IN. IN TIME THE SITUATION BECAME MORE ACUTE AND THE PLANET WAS PLUNGED INTO A STATE OF TOTAL WAR IN WHICH MANY DIED SENSELESSLY.

ULTRA CITY WAS PRACTICALLY A NEUTRAL CITY IN ADDITION TO THE LAST BASTION OF HUMANITY. MANY HAD EVEN DOUBTED ITS EXISTENCE ALTOGETHER, BUT GIVEN THE LACK OF OTHER PROSPECTS, HAD RESOLVED TO BELIEVE IN IT.

THEY HOPED THAT SINCE THE POLIS HAD NOT INTERFERED IN THE ALL-OUT WAR BETWEEN EAST AND WEST, IT MIGHT BE THE SCENE OF PEACEFUL NEGOTIATIONS BETWEEN THE FORMER ENEMIES, AND THAT IN A LONGER PERSPECTIVE THE POSSIBLE REMNANTS OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION MIGHT BE GATHERED AND ORGANIZED TO DO BATTLE WITH THE GUARRONS, WHO WERE GENERALLY VERY SECRETIVE AND SUBVERSIVE CREATURES ABOUT WHOSE ORGANIZATION AND HIERARCHY LITTLE WAS KNOWN.

- 'MARK, DO YOU REALLY BELIEVE THEY WILL OPEN UP TO US? WHAT IF THERE'S JUST NOTHING THERE?', VOICED PAUL'S CONCERNS.

- 'THEY SHOULD OPEN UP,' MARK REPLIED, WITH A SLIGHT SNORT OF CONTEMPT, 'THE INFORMATION AND ORDERS WERE GIVEN TO ME PERSONALLY BY GENERAL JACOB WALLACE.'

- 'YOU DON'T THINK HE COULD HAVE BEEN FOOLED? AFTER ALL, BY NOW WORD OF HIS EXISTENCE WOULD HAVE GOTTEN OUT FROM SOMEWHERE.,' PAUL PERSISTED.

- 'THE GENERAL EVEN GAVE ME THE SECRET PASSWORDS. LET'S HOPE THEY HAVEN'T CHANGED THEM IN THE MEANTIME.,' SAID MARK WITH SLIGHT IRRITATION.

WHILE THIS VERY BRIEF CONVERSATION WAS GOING ON SOMEONE IN THE CROWD GROANED AND SAID IN AS TORTURED A VOICE AS IF FROM THE DEPTHS OF HELL:

- 'I HOPE YOU'RE RIGHT, MARK, BECAUSE YOU'VE BEEN DRAGGING US AROUND THE DAMNED DESERT FOR TEN DAYS NOW. QUITE A FEW PEOPLE ARE ON THE EDGE OF THEIR STRENGTH AND ARE ALREADY BEGINNING TO BE DISSATISFIED. WHAT IF THERE REALLY IS NOTHING OUT THERE AND ALL THIS WANDERING HAS BEEN FOR NOTHING?', THIS REMARK CAME FROM A MOUSE-FACED MAN WHOSE REAL NAME FEW KNEW, AND WAS KNOWN AMONG HIS COLLEAGUES AS THE RAT, BECAUSE OF THE PREDATORY EXPRESSION HE TOOK ON WHEN HE GOT INTO A FIGHT WITH AN ENEMY. THE OTHER SOLDIERS DIDN'T PARTICULARLY LIKE HIM, BUT THEY FELT SOMETHING OF AWE FOR HIM.

MEANWHILE SOME OF THE OTHERS PRICKED UP THEIR EARS AND LISTENED TO THE CONVERSATION, AND HERE AND THERE A VOICE OR TWO WAS HEARD IN FAVOUR OF WHAT RAT SAID. THE GROUP WAS NOW ENTERING WINDY CANYON, ALSO KNOWN AS DEVIL'S THROAT, FOR AGAIN ACCORDING TO LEGEND, QUITE A FEW PEOPLE HAD DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE IN THESE PARTS. OF COURSE THERE WERE NO LIVING EYEWITNESSES TO CONFIRM IT, SO THE PLACE WAS SHROUDED IN MYSTERY. FROM HERE ON, ACCORDING TO THE INSTRUCTIONS MARK HAD RECEIVED, THE REAL APPROACHES TO THE SECRET CITY BEGAN. HE SLOWED HIS PACE AND SAID:

- 'BOYS, BE CAREFUL,' WITH THOSE WORDS, HE TOOK OFF THE STRAP OF HIS PLASMA RIFLE AND BROUGHT IT TO THE READY TO FIRE.

- 'I THINK WE'D BETTER MAKE A TIGHTER FORMATION,' PAUL ADDED. 'LIKE ANYTHING, A GUARRON MIGHT POP OUT OF SOMEWHERE...'

HE DIDN'T FINISH WHEN THERE WAS A SUDDEN WHISTLING SOUND AND A SHARP FEATHER OF ENORMOUS SIZE LANDED JUST INCHES FROM HIM.

- 'ARCHANEANS,' THE RAT BARELY STAMMERED, AND DUCKED UNDER A LARGE PROTRUDING FLAT STONE THAT FORMED SOMETHING AKIN TO A SMALL ALCOVE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE OTHERWISE DESERTED AREA TO PROTECT HIMSELF FROM THE WHOLE BARRAGE OF DEADLY FEATHER-SHOTS THAT SUDDENLY POURED DOWN FROM ABOVE.

THERE WAS A COMMOTION THROUGHOUT THE CROWD, AS NOT ALL OF THEM WERE MILITARY, AND THERE WERE QUITE A FEW CIVILIANS AS WELL, WITH THE ENTIRE GROUP NUMBERING NO MORE THAN THIRTY OR FORTY. FEW WERE THOSE WHO HAD HEARD OF THE TERRIBLE BIRD-MEN THAT HAD APPEARED AS A RESULT OF RADIOACTIVE MUTATION FOLLOWING A MALFUNCTION IN THE POLYGON REACTOR AT THE MYSTERIOUS NINTH QUADRANT MILITARY BASE. IT WAS RUMORED THAT SECRET HUMAN GENETIC EXPERIMENTS WERE BEING CONDUCTED THERE, SOMETHING THAT WAS NEVER OFFICIALLY CONFIRMED TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC. BUT THESE CURIOUS DETAILS WOULD HARDLY BE HELPFUL IN SAVING THEIR OWN SKINS AT THE MOMENT.

STILL HEARING THE WHISTLING, MARK CROUCHED AND LEANED HIS BACK AGAINST A NEARBY BOULDER, JUTTING UP LIKE A PHALIC SYMBOL, AND TOOK AIM AT ONE OF THE CREATURES. THEY WERE SOARING, AND THEIR HUGE WINGS, WITH A SPREAD OF SEVERAL FEET, NOW OBSCURED THE SUN, NOW ITS BURNING LIGHT PROTRUDED THROUGH THE TIPS OF THEIR FEATHERS.

MARK HELD HIS BREATH FOR A SECOND AND UTTERED A FEW FRAGMENTARY SHOTS, BUT THE CREATURES WERE TOO AGILE AND HE ONLY MANAGED TO BRING ONE DOWN. ITS LARGE TORSO PAINTED AN IRREGULAR SPIRAL IN THE AIR AND STOMPED HILARIOUSLY DOWN INTO THE DUST LIKE UNDEAD CHILDREN'S FEET IN A SANDBOX. THE OTHER CREATURES GAVE AN UGLY ROAR, BUT BEGAN TO FALL ONE BY ONE. EVIDENTLY SOMETHING WAS DESTROYING THEM WITH SYSTEMATIC AND COLD-BLOODED METHODICALNESS.

MARK NOTICED THAT HIS FAITHFUL FRIEND PAUL HAD TURNED HIS SNIPER RIFLE AT A HIGHLY UNUSUAL ANGLE DUE TO THE NATURE OF THE BATTLE, TAKING COVER BETWEEN A SMALL PILE OF LOW BOULDERS THAT, WHILE PROVIDING SOME COVER, WAS NOT A SAFE ENOUGH REFUGE. AND THE FEATHERS WERE STILL STILL POURING IN, THOUGH SLIGHTLY LESS THAN BEFORE. IN SPITE OF HIS TENSENESS, MARK WAS ABLE TO NOTICE THAT BESIDES HIMSELF, PAUL, AND THE RAT, WHO OCCASIONALLY DROPPED A BRIEF BITE OF HIS COVER INTO THE ALCOVE, THE BATTLE WITH THE CREATURES WAS BEING FOUGHT BY ONLY 3 OTHER WARRIORS. ONE WAS HIS FORMER COMPANY COMMANDER, NICKNAMED LONG JACK BECAUSE FOR SOME REASON HE SOMETIMES PRONOUNCED THE LAST WORD OF HIS SENTENCE ELONGATED. OTHERWISE, LONG JACK WAS NOT TALL IN STATURE AT ALL, RATHER AVERAGE, BUT HE WAS AN EXTREMELY WIRY WARRIOR WHO NEVER BACKED DOWN, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS APPROACHING HIS FORTIETH YEAR AND SOME OF THE YOUNGER SOLDIERS JOKINGLY CALLED HIM 'GRANDPA JACK' AMONGST THEMSELVES. THE OTHER WAS SAM WALLACE, THE SON OF GENERAL JACOB WALLACE, WHO WAS YOUNG AND RELATIVELY INEXPERIENCED, BUT CARRIED THE HEART AND FIGHTING SPIRIT OF HIS LATE FATHER, AND OF COURSE FATHER. FATHER WAS ANOTHER STRANGE FIGURE. ALTHOUGH HE WAS OBVIOUSLY AN ATHEIST, WHEN HE SHOT AN ENEMY COMBATANT HE WOULD MUTTER UNDER HIS BREATH 'GOD FORGIVE HIM'. SOME OF THE SOLDIERS CONSIDERED HIM A BIT OF A WEIRDO, FOR OTHERS HE WAS A ROLE MODEL, BECAUSE ALTHOUGH HE WAS NOT PARTICULARLY TALKATIVE, HE WAS A PARTY POOPER AND A BRAWLER, WHICH BY

THE WAY DID NOT AFFECT HIS MILITARY DISCIPLINE IN THE LEAST. IT ALL WENT LIKE A FILMSTRIP THROUGH MARK'S MIND IN A SPLIT SECOND.

MEANWHILE, AFTER THE CREATURES' UNEXPECTED REBUFF FROM BELOW, THEY SEEMED TO GIVE UP THE FIGHT AND FLEW AWAY WITH A QUICK FLAP OF THEIR WINGS UNTIL THEIR HUGE SILHOUETTES WERE HIDDEN OVER THE HORIZON.

GENERAL WALLACE'S SON WAS THE FIRST TO CALL:

- WHAT WAS THAT, MARK? I'VE NEVER EVEN HEARD OF SUCH CREATURES BEFORE!

- 'THEY'RE ARCHANAYANS,' HE REPLIED COMPETENTLY AND WITH SATISFACTION, WITHOUT BEING QUESTIONED BY THE RAT, WHO HAD MEANWHILE CRAWLED OUT FROM UNDER THE ALCOVE AND WAS BRUSHING DUST AND SAND FROM HIS PATHETIC RAGS, 'RUMOUR HAS IT THAT THESE CREATURES WERE THE PRODUCT OF AN ARTIFICIAL DEVELOPMENT TO COUNTERACT THE GUARRON, AT THE EXPENSE OF HUMANS.

- 'I HAVE HEARD THAT STORY TOO,' INTERJECTED PAUL, WHO WAS BANDAGING HIS HAND, WHICH BORE A SLIGHT WOUND FROM A FEATHER THAT HAD ACCIDENTALLY FEATHERED HIM, 'BUT HOW FAR THAT IS TRUE WE CAN ONLY GUESS?

- 'YOU KNOW,' MARK APPROACHED THE GROUP, RELOADING HIS AUTOMATIC, 'I THINK THIS COULD JUST BE FURTHER PROOF THAT WE'RE MOVING IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION? WHATEVER THESE CREATURES ARE, APPARENTLY THEIR LAIR IS NEARBY, AND THEY APPEAR TO BE A PERFECT OBSTACLE FOR ANYONE CURIOUS ABOUT THESE PLACES. I HAVE A FEELING THE CITY IS PRETTY CLOSE TO US.

- 'AND WHERE AMONGST ALL THESE COTTAGERS COULD IT BE?,' ASKED RAT, IN HIS TYPICAL QUERULOUS STYLE, 'I SEE NOTHING BUT SAND AND STONES, AND OUR SUPPLY OF WATER IS ALMOST EXHAUSTED.

- 'ACCORDING TO GENERAL WALLACE,' MARK BEGAN CONFIDENTLY, 'WE SHOULD BE LESS THAN HALF A DAY'S JOURNEY AWAY.'

SAYING THIS, HE PAUSED FOR A MOMENT AND LOOKED AT PAUL, SEARCHING HIS GAZE FOR SUPPORT, IGNORING RAT'S MUTTERINGS AND CONTEMPTUOUS MUTTERINGS.

THE REST OF THE GROUP HAD ALSO CLUSTERED AROUND THEM, SOME STILL HOLDING THEIR ASSAULT RIFLES AT THE READY FOR FEAR OF THE RETURN OF THE NIGHTMARISH FEATHERED WARRIORS.

- 'IF NOTHING SLOWS US DOWN UNTIL THEN,' FATHER INTERJECTED FOR THE FIRST TIME.

THERE WAS A FLURRY OF MURMURING AMONGST THE GROUP, AS HE QUITE RARELY SPOKE, BUT HIS WORD WAS ALWAYS ON THE MARK.

- 'I DON'T BELIEVE THE GENERAL HASN'T TOLD YOU ABOUT THE ZENDORIAN KEVLARITE HERMETIC GATE GUARDS, WHO HAVE ORDERS TO SHOOT ANYTHING LIVING WITHIN HALF A KILOMETRE,' FATHER CONTINUED.

THERE WERE MURMURS AMONG THE CROWD AGAIN.

- 'NOT THAT I WANT TO FRIGHTEN YOU,' FATHER BEGAN HIS SERMON, 'BUT THE ROAD INEVITABLY PASSES THROUGH THE LANDORIAN PASS, AND WHAT AWAITS US THERE GOD ONLY KNOWS. SO IT MAY TAKE US A GOOD DEAL MORE THAN HALF A DAY'S JOURNEY, MARK.'

- 'AND HOW DO YOU KNOW?,' SNIFFED MARK, 'THE GENERAL...'

- 'THE GENERAL, THE GENERAL,' FATHER QUIPPED, 'WITH ALL DUE RESPECT TO JACOB, AND TO YOU, I'VE BEEN THROUGH HERE BEFORE. ALLOW ME TO BE MORE AWARE THAN YOU.'

- 'AND WHAT WAS IT YOU WERE LOOKING FOR SO MUCH WITH THOSE PREDATORY BASTARDS?,' CALLED RAT.

THE FATHER ONLY SMILED SOURLY AND REPLIED:

- 'I WAS VERY MUCH IN THE MOOD FOR ROAST CHICKEN, SO I DECIDED TO SHOOT ONE OR TWO...'

^^^

FATHER'S WORDS WERE OBVIOUSLY NOT ENTIRELY WITHOUT MERIT, FOR ALTHOUGH THE GROUP SPED UP THEIR PROGRESS AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, THEY HAD NOT YET REACHED THEIR FINAL DESTINATION BY EVENING. THE CANYON THAT MARK HAD ASSUMED THEY WOULD BE ABLE TO CROSS IN A FEW HOURS TURNED OUT TO BE MUCH LARGER THAN EXPECTED, OR PERHAPS EVERYTHING AROUND THEM WAS A DECEPTIVE MIRAGE AND THEY WERE JUST GOING IN CIRCLES? IN A CIRCLE, WAS THAT POSSIBLE? AND THE GENERAL'S INSTRUCTIONS OR THE STRANGE AND EVEN BRUTAL RAMBLINGS OF THAT RENEGADE FATHER? MARK'S MEN WERE GROWING WEARY, AND DRINKING WATER WAS LEFT IN ONLY TWO CANTEENS. AND AFTER THEY RAN OUT TOO? THEN...MARK KNEW HOW MANY OF HIS BATTLE COMRADES HAD DIED FOR THIS SIMPLE AND TRIVIAL REASON, BUT...WHAT COULD HE DO AGAINST NATURE!

- 'IF WE DON'T FIND SOME SORT OF SPRING SOON, MARK, WE'RE IRRETRIEVABLY LOST,' PAUL WHISPERED TO HIM, WHO HAD CAUGHT UP WITH HIM AND WAS PACING WEARILY, 'THE CIVILIANS WON'T LAST EITHER, AND WHATEVER WE SAY, I DON'T THINK YOU'RE SURE WE'LL FIND ANYTHING THERE AT ALL EITHER.'

MARK PAUSED FOR A MOMENT, CASTING A CURSORY GLANCE AT THE REST OF HIS COMPANIONS BESIDES HIMSELF, PAUL, SAM WALLACE, LONG JACK, FATHER AND RAT, THERE WERE ONLY A FEW YOUNG CONSCRIPTS LEFT WHO COULD BARELY HOLD A PLASMA RIFLE. AND A DOZEN CIVILIANS.

UNNOTICED ALONG THE WAY, SEVERAL OF THE SICK AND WOUNDED HAD DIED AND THE CARAVAN HAD BEEN REDUCED BY ABOUT A THIRD. THEY HADN'T EVEN HEARD THEM STOMPING IN THE DUST? WAS THAT POSSIBLE. THEY'D LOST NEARLY A DOZEN OF THEIR PEOPLE, MOSTLY CIVILIANS, WITHOUT EVEN FEELING IT?

- 'MARK, DUMP THEM! STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN IN THESE PARTS SOMETIMES,' FATHER SAID IN A SLIGHTLY MYSTERIOUS TONE, 'BUT WE CAN ONLY TURN THEM TO OUR ADVANTAGE IF...'

- 'ONLY IF? WHAT?,' GASPED MARK.

- 'LOOK, THE ONLY WAY WE'RE GOING TO FIND WATER IN THESE DRY PLACES IS TO DIG UP SOME MAN-EATING ENDUARO CACTUS.'

- 'PLEASE?,' MARK BARELY RESTRAINED HIMSELF FROM SHOUTING.

- 'NOTHING TO BE FOOLED ABOUT,' ADDED THE RAT WITH A WRY GRIN AS HE APPROACHED THE 'CO-CREATURES'. 'THOSE CIVILIANS AT THE BACK, WRITE THEM OFF. EVEN IF THEY CAN LAST WITHOUT WATER, WHICH IS IMPOSSIBLE, THEY ARE COMPLETELY UNFIT FOR COMBAT. ONLY DRAGGING THEM ALONG LIKE A CONDEMNED CLUB OF THEIR OWN. IF YOU ASK ME, DIRECTLY SHOOT THEM AND THAT'S IT!

- 'THEY ARE IMPORTANT PRISONERS,' OBJECTED PAUL. 'ISN'T THAT RIGHT, MARK?'

MARK NODDED.

- 'PRISONER-PRISONERS,' THE FATHER TOSSED AT THEM, 'IF YOU WANT US NOT TO BECOME PRISONERS ON THESE ROCKS AND SANDS, WE'D BETTER GET OUR ASSES KICKED. IT IS NOW REALLY BEGINNING TO GET DARK, AND SOON IT WILL BE COMPLETELY DARK. WE HAVE LESS THAN AN HOUR.'

- 'ALL RIGHT, SINCE YOU'RE SO AWARE OF THESE CACTI, TELL US WHAT TO DO,' MARK SNAPPED AT HIM.

FATHER WAS WAITING FOR JUST THAT. SUDDENLY HE BECAME DOWNRIGHT TALKATIVE, AS UNCHARACTERISTIC AS THAT WAS FOR



HIM. HE DESCRIBED IN DETAIL HOW THESE PREDATORY PLANTS FED MAINLY ON HUMAN CARRION, AS WELL AS ON LIVING HUMANS, FROM WHOSE BLOOD AND SECRETIONS THEY GOT THE WATER THEY NEEDED. IN FACT, THEY SPENT THE ENTIRE DAY UNDERGROUND, WHERE TEMPERATURES WERE LOWER THAN ON THE SURFACE, SO AS NOT TO EVAPORATE THE PROCESSED WATER, AND IN THE EVENING, WHEN TEMPERATURES DROPPED, THEY CAME UP TO BREATHE.

- 'THAT'S WHEN WE'LL HIT THEM,' FATHER EXPRESSED WITH MILD SATISFACTION, 'EVEN IF WE ONLY KILL ONE, WE'LL HAVE THE WATER WE NEED FOR AT LEAST TWO MORE DAYS.'

- 'AND HOW DO YOU KNOW THEY'VE EATEN ANYTHING TO CONTAIN ENOUGH WATER?,' INTERJECTED SAM WALLACE, 'WHAT IF WE JUST WASTE THE LAST OF OUR REMAINING STRENGTH?'

- 'DO WE HAVE ANY OTHER CHOICE?,' CALLED LONG JACK FOR THE FIRST TIME, LOUDLY PROLONGING THE LAST WORD. 'WHATEVER HAPPENS, I'LL BE GLAD TO DIE AMONG YOU GUYS.'

- 'YOU'VE LIVED YOUR LIFE, GRANDPA JACK, BUT I'VE GOT MORE TO SEE OF LIFE,' THE RAT SHRUGGED.

DESPITE THE OMINOUS SURROUNDINGS, EVERYONE BURST OUT LAUGHING. IT WAS JUST THAT THEIR NERVES WERE STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT AND LAUGHTER WAS THE ONLY POSSIBLE 'OUTLET' AT THAT MOMENT. AND THE RAT WAS GIVING THEM SOME...

- 'MARK, WHAT DO YOU DECIDE?,' ASKED THE FATHER QUITE SERIOUSLY.

- 'WE'D BETTER DO SOMETHING,' SAID MARK, A LITTLE EXCITEDLY.

- 'I'M WITH YOU,' SAID SAM WALLACE ENTHUSIASTICALLY.

- 'AND ME,' ADDED GRANDPA JACK.

- 'WELL IF THAT'S SO, WRITE ME TOO,' RAT WINKED AT THEM DEVILISHLY.

- 'WELL, PAUL, WHAT DO YOU THINK?,' TOSSED IN MARK.

HE NOTICED FOR THE FIRST TIME THAT THE SNIPER HAD MOVED TO ONE SIDE AND WAS CROUCHING SLIGHTLY, CHECKING HIS WEAPON AND BRINGING IT TO THE READY.

- MARK, I JUST WONDER IF THOSE SAME CACTI ATE OUR CIVILIANS FOR LUNCH.

- 'IT'S POSSIBLE,' FATHER SAID, COMPLETELY DISPASSIONATE.

- 'DID YOU SEE THEM?,' ASKED MARK STERNLY.

- 'MARK THEY ATTACK VERY QUICKLY. THE GROUND BENEATH THE VICTIM'S FEET DISSOLVED AND THEY DRAGGED HIM INTO THE SAND.'

- 'DID YOU SEE THEM?,' REPEATED MARK.

- AND YES I DID, THEY WERE AN UNNECESSARY BURDEN, MARK.

- YOU WANT TO KNOW THAT YOU SUSPECTED THINGS MIGHT TURN OUT THIS WAY AND DELIBERATELY LEFT THEM TO DIE.

- MARK, THEY WERE SICK AND THEY WERE DOOMED.

MARK STAYED AS IF NUMB FOR A MOMENT, BUT SUDDENLY DELIVERED A LIGHTNING LEFT CROSS TO THE FATHER'S NOSE, GOOD THING HE WAS WEARING THE HELMET OF HIS SPACESUIT OR HE MIGHT HAVE SMASHED HIS HEAD RIGHT THROUGH. FROM THE IMPACT, FATHER JUST SAT DOWN ON THE SAND. THE OTHERS GASPED IN SURPRISE.

FATHER STOOD UP SHAKING THE DUST OFF HIMSELF, WITH NO APPARENT DESIRE TO FIGHT BACK AT THE PROVOCATION.

- 'DON'T YOU EVER DO ANYTHING BEHIND MY BACK AGAIN,' MARK HISSSED QUIETLY, 'WE EITHER STICK TOGETHER OR DIE.'

- MARK, THERE'S NO NEED TO REACT SO EMOTIONALLY. WE WOULD HAVE DIED IF I HADN'T ACTED THAT WAY.

WITH A VISIBLY MORE SOBER EXPRESSION, MARK UTTERED BARELY AUDIBLY:

- YOU MAY BE RIGHT, BUT STILL DON'T DO IT.

- 'COME ON, BULLIES, LET'S CATCH ONE OF THOSE MAN-EATING GROWTHS,' AT TRIED TO LIGHTEN THE ATMOSPHERE.

- 'AND WHAT SHOULD WE DO WITH THOSE?,' THE FATHER POINTED TO THE OTHER CIVILIANS WHO WERE STANDING TEN METERS AWAY AND WATCHING, TRYING TO CATCH WHAT THE 'BOSSES' WERE UP TO.

- 'WHAT SHOULD WE DO? IF THEY SURVIVE, THEY SURVIVE, BUT I'M NOT GOING TO DELIBERATELY KILL THEM IN DEFIANCE OF GENERAL WALLACE'S ORDERS,' MARK REPLIED, NOW COMPLETELY CALM.

- 'THAT'S THE WAY I WANT YOU,' THE FATHER NODDED TO HIM.

MARK MADE AS IF HE HADN'T HEARD HIM.

NEARLY HALF AN HOUR HAD ELAPSED WHILE THIS PROLONGED DIALOGUE WAS BEING CARRIED ON, AND THE GROUP PREPARED FRANTICALLY, FOR THE TIME DURING WHICH THE CACTI WERE SURFACING WAS LIMITED, AND IF THEY MISSED IT WHO KNEW WHEN THEY WOULD REAPPEAR. PAUL ADJUSTED HIS MYELITE ZETKANG 240 SNIPER RIFLE AND STATED:

- I'LL COVER YOU.

THE OTHERS OCCUPIED VARIOUS HIGHER POINTS OF THE CANYON, DOING THEIR BEST TO AVOID HAVING DIRECT CONTACT WITH THE SAND BENEATH THEIR FEET. MORE THAN AN HOUR PASSED, BUT NOT A SINGLE CACTUS HAD SHOWN ITSELF. A FEW OF THEM WERE STARTING TO GET A LITTLE NERVOUS, ESPECIALLY SINCE THE COLD WIND WAS BLOWING HARD AND KICKING UP CLOUDS OF DUST AND SMALL PEBBLES, TOSSING THEM CARELESSLY JUST A FEW FEET AWAY.

- 'PAUL, CAN YOU HEAR ME?,' WHISPERED MARK OVER THE CYCLOTRON SYNTHESIZER. THE DEVICE ALTERED HIS VOICE, MAKING IT SOUND DEADPAN.

- I DON'T HAVE A GOOD ENOUGH VIEW BECAUSE OF THIS WIND, BUT HOPEFULLY THE DAMN CACTI WILL SHOW UP AFTER ALL. ARE YOU AT THE READY?

- 'YES,' HE HEARD MARK'S, WALLACE'S, LONG JACK'S, FATHER'S AND FINALLY RAT'S VOICES IN SUCCESSION OVER THE TRANSMITTER.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES THE WIND SEEMED TO DIE DOWN BRIEFLY AND THE SAND STIRRED SLIGHTLY. SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN THE FACES OF THE SOLDIERS, BUT THEY STRAINED THEIR SENSES TO USE THEIR LIGHTNING REFLEXES WHEN NEEDED. AFTER A MOMENT, SEVERAL CACTI SHOWED THEMSELVES ABOVE THE SURFACE. THEY WERE DEFINITELY NOT PLEASANT TO LOOK AT. THEY WERE ABOUT THREE METERS TALL. THEY HAD SHORT AND HARD GRAY SPINES, SHARP AS NAILS. THEIR SLIMY TRUNKS LOOKED LIKE CARICATURES OUT OF A COMIC BOOK. THEIR IRREGULAR SHAPE WAS UGLY, BUT IT RADIATED A HIDDEN MENACE. AND NEAR THE BOTTOM, THEY HAD AN OPENING SIMILAR TO...

- 'OH MY GOD!,' MARK MUTTERED. 'THAT MUST BE WHERE THEY FEED FROM...'

- 'FIRE,' FATHER MUTTERED INTO THE TRANSMITTER.

SUDDENLY THE EERIE SILENCE AROUND WAS SPLIT BY AUTOMATIC GUNFIRE AND THE CUT OFF AND MUFFLED WHISTLE OF A SNIPER RIFLE.

^^^

THE CAMP FIRE CRACKLED MERRILY. THEY HAD LIT IT IN AN ALCOVE FROM WHERE IT WAS QUITE DIFFICULT TO SEE. THE CIVILIANS HAD STAYED TO THE SIDE, GUARDED BY THE FEW YOUNG MEN, WHILE THE

OLD DOGS HAD POSITIONED THEMSELVES NEXT TO THE FIRE THEY HAD LIT FROM GATHERED TRASH THAT HAD BEEN LIBERALLY DOUSED WITH INTERRON FUEL.

- 'GOOD CATCH, WASN'T IT, MARK,' CALLED LONG JACK, 'PAUL CERTAINLY DID A GOOD JOB. BUT SAMMY'S LEARNING NOW TOO,' HE ADDED, GIVING SAM WALLACE A FRIENDLY TAP ON THE SHOULDER. 'A GLORIOUS BOY HE'LL MAKE, MARK MY WORD.'

- 'WE CRACKED 'EM UP,' RAT GRINNED, EXPOSING HIS MOUSY FACE TO THE LIGHT OF THE CAMPFIRE. 'THREE WHOLE PIECES. I WASN'T EXPECTING THAT MANY, HONEST. THE OTHERS INSTANTLY HID IN THE SAND AND ARE UNLIKELY TO MOVE ANYTIME SOON.'

- 'THEY'RE NOT RATIONAL CREATURES,' FATHER ADDED. 'JUST A PURE PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTION.'

- 'A PHYSIOLOGICAL REACTION, YEAH?,' THE RAT MADE AN OBSCENE GESTURE WITH HIS HAND AND LIPS, 'VERY ACCURATELY PUT,' AND BEGAN TO CHUCKLE AT HIS OWN WITTICISMS.

MARK WAS LOST IN HIS OWN UNHAPPY THOUGHTS, AND PAUL WHO WAS KEEPING A WATCHFUL EYE ON HIS FRIEND DIDN'T HAVE THE COURAGE TO TEAR HIM AWAY FROM THEM. IN FACT PRIVATE LENNER HAD FALLEN INTO A STRANGE SORT OF REVERIE, IN WHICH HE COULD DISTINCTLY HEAR THE WORDS OF THE BATTLE-COMRADES CLUSTERED ABOUT HIM, BUT HE SEEMED TO BE IN ANOTHER PLACE ALSO, THOUSANDS OF MILES AWAY, A PLACE FAR MORE VISIBLE TO HIM THAN THE SURROUNDING WILDERNESS. HE RECALLED HIS FIRST DAYS AS A YOUNG CADET AT THE ROYAL ACADEMY IN ENSARIANAN, THE CAPITAL OF UBUNDER. A BEAUTIFUL, ULTRAMODERN CITY WHOSE POPULATION WAS HUGE. THE FUTURISTIC DWELLINGS THAT THE PEOPLE INHABITED WERE SHAPED LIKE BEAN PODS, HALF DRIVEN INTO THE GROUND AND BORE THE NAME XENTAR. PERHAPS THE GREATEST EQUALITY THAT COULD EXIST IN A HUMAN SOCIETY REIGNED IN THIS CITY. THE ONLY INEQUALITY CAME FROM THE INTERNAL PLOYS. THERE WAS NO DIVISION BY WEALTH, BACKGROUND, OR SOCIAL STANDING. ALL THAT MATTERED WAS A

BROTHER'S WORD, HONESTY, VALOR, MANHOOD, WISDOM. THE CITY WAS ENCIRCLED BY THREE KINDS OF DEFENSIVE WALLS. MAINLY BECAUSE OF THE GUARRONS, AND BECAUSE OF THE VARIOUS UNFRIENDLY TO HUMANS CREATURES INHABITING THE PLANET. NATURALLY, PEOPLE WERE CONSTANTLY DISCOVERING NEW AND NEW OF THEM, EXPLORING PREVIOUSLY UNDISCOVERED PLACES.

MARK WAS VALEDICTORIAN OF HIS HIGH SCHOOL CLASS, AND UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF HIS FATHER, HE HEADED OFF TO CADET SCHOOL. HIS MOTHER DIDN'T QUITE AGREE WITH THIS, BUT SHE WASN'T ABOUT TO INTERFERE IN THE FATHER-SON RELATIONSHIP. SHE KNEW VERY WELL THAT MEN HAD A DIFFERENT, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE ON LIFE, AND THERE HAD BEEN RUMORS OF A BREWING WAR LATELY. ACTUALLY, SUCH RANTS WERE NOT A NOVELTY, BUT THEY WERE MORE LIKE A JOKE THAN SOMETHING REALLY SERIOUS. PRACTICALLY EVERYONE SCOFFED SLIGHTLY BECAUSE THEY CONSIDERED THEM UNREALISTIC TO SAY THE LEAST. ON THE OTHER HAND, INWARDLY SOME MORE FARSIGHTED PEOPLE FEARED THAT THEY WOULD COME TRUE, BUT DID NOT DARE TO VOICE THEIR DOUBTS OUT LOUD.

ONE EVENING MARK CAME HOME. THE TRUTH WAS THAT HE HAD BEEN PUTTING OFF THIS MOMENT FOR A LONG TIME, BUT HERE IT WAS AT LAST. HE FOUND HIS PARENTS IN THE LIVING ROOM, WHERE THE FIRE FROM THE FIREPLACE WAS CRACKLING MERRILY. WINTER WAS COMING ON AND THE BLIZZARD WAS HOWLING FIERCELY OUTSIDE.

- MOM, DAD I'M HERE TO TELL YOU ABOUT A DECISION I'VE MADE.

HIS PARENTS LOOKED AT HIM WITH SOME CURIOSITY, BUT WAITED FOR HIM TO TELL THEM HIS INTENTIONS.

- I'VE DECIDED TO ENTER THE ROYAL ACADEMY AS A CADET, I'VE EVEN ALREADY SUBMITTED MY PAPERS.

THEY BOTH LOOKED AT EACH OTHER. HIS FATHER NODDED APPROVINGLY, BUT HIS MOTHER'S FACE SHOWED SOME CONCERN, WHICH SHE TRIED TO HIDE. IT DIDN'T ESCAPE MARK'S GAZE.

- WHAT'S THE MATTER MUM, DON'T YOU LIKE THIS LINE OF WORK? THINK YOU'LL SOON SEE ME DRESSED IN A SHINY CADET UNIFORM. AND I'LL BE DEFENDING ENSARIANAN SOMEDAY.

- 'ON THE CONTRARY, YOUR MOTHER IS PLEASED, MY BOY,' REPLIED HIS FATHER, GEORGE LENNER. 'ISN'T THAT RIGHT, DEAR? A MILITARY CAREER HAS ALWAYS BEEN WORTHY OF RESPECT.'

- 'OF COURSE,' HIS MOTHER TRIED TO SMILE, BUT TRY AS SHE MIGHT, HER ANXIETY WAS EVIDENT. 'THAT ELOHY WANTS TO ATTACK US, AND THAT ALL THE YOUTHS WILL SOON BE CALLED TO A GENERAL MOBILIZATION.'

- 'IT'S JUST IDLE TALK, DEAR,' HER HUSBAND TRIED TO REASSURE HER. 'AFTER ALL, PEOPLE CAN SAY WHAT THEY LIKE,' HE ADDED, THOUGH HE DIDN'T SEEM QUITE SURE OF WHAT HE WAS SAYING.

MARK COULD SEE HIS PARENTS' SPLIT, THOUGH HIS FATHER'S APPROVAL AND HIS MOTHER'S COVERT DISAPPROVAL WERE EVIDENT. HE DECIDED TO TRY HIS LAST RESORT TO BE PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD. HE PAUSED BRIEFLY TO SORT OUT HIS THOUGHTS BEFORE BEGINNING. AND MAINLY TO BE MORE CONVINCING.

- EVERYONE IN THIS ROOM KNOWS THAT ALL MY CONSCIOUS LIFE YOU HAVE WANTED TO RAISE ME TO BE A CONSCIENTIOUS AND RESPONSIBLE PERSON WHO WILL ACCEPT THE CONSEQUENCES OF MY ACTIONS, WHETHER THEY ARE GOOD OR BAD. MY FRIEND KEITH, WHOSE FATHER WORKS FOR THE ENSARIANAN MINISTRY OF THE INTERIOR, HAS BEEN VISIBLY WORRIED LATELY. HE'S OBLIGED TO MAINTAIN COMPLETE CONFIDENTIALITY, BUT...

HIS PARENTS HAD LISTENED CAREFULLY TO HIS WORDS, AND EVEN THE SEMI-DARK ROOM HAD TAKEN ON A SOMEWHAT SOLEMN AIR.

- 'ACCORDING TO WHAT KEITH HAS HEARD FROM VARIOUS OTHER PLACES, WHICH HE DIDN'T WISH TO NAME,' MARK CONTINUED WITH INCREASING CONFIDENCE, 'THE REASON THEY ATTACKED US HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH IDEOLOGIES OR UNDERSTANDINGS AT ALL, BUT WITH OUR RICH DEPOSITS OF INTERRON FUEL AND ZENDORIAN

KEVLARITE, WHICH THEY DESPERATELY NEEDED TO MAINTAIN THEIR MILITARY MIGHT IF THEY WANTED TO 'FLEX THEIR MUSCLES' WITH US, AND ALSO TO SURVIVE THE GUARRON RAIDS. THE PROBLEM IS...

- 'THE PROBLEM IS?,' HIS MOTHER HALF-VOICED, HER EYES, IMMERSED IN THE DARKNESS OF THE ROOM, REFLECTING THE FLAMES FROM THE FIREPLACE LIKE A SMOOTH MIRROR SURFACE.

- 'THE PROBLEM IS THAT,' THEY HAVE FAILED TO AGREE, ON THE REDISTRIBUTION OF INFLUENCE IN THE AUTONOMOUS REGION OF SYNTHROS, WHERE THERE ARE MANY UNEXPLORED AREAS, SOME OF WHICH ARE SUPPOSED TO CONTAIN VAST DEPOSITS OF THE VITAL RAW MATERIALS WE HAVE IN ABUNDANCE.

- 'THAT IS TO SAY, THE ISSUE IS MORE ECONOMIC,' HIS FATHER SAID, WITH ONLY MILD IRONY. 'APPARENTLY, AS LONG AS THE WORLD KEEPS TURNING, THINGS WON'T CHANGE MUCH.'

A SHIVER TICKLED DOWN HIS MOTHER'S BACK, SHE HAD A PREMONITION THAT SHE WAS ABOUT TO HEAR THE MOST IMPORTANT THING.

- LIKE I SAID, WITHOUT THE RAW MATERIALS VITAL TO THEM, THEY WOULDN'T SURVIVE. THEIR CAPITAL CITY OF IMGRADON, THOUGH WELL FORTIFIED NEEDED FRESH RESOURCES TO MAINTAIN ITS FIGHTING CAPACITY.

- 'PERHAPS THE SITUATION IS NOT ENTIRELY HOPELESS AFTER ALL,' SIGHED HIS FATHER, WHO HAD NOW BECOME COMPLETELY SERIOUS.

- FATHER, I'M AFRAID THINGS ARE EVEN WORSE. IF OUR TWO OPPOSING CAMPS DON'T COME TO AN AGREEMENT AND WE THROW OURSELVES INTO THIS SENSELESS WAR, THE ENTIRE HUMAN POPULATION OF THE PLANET COULD BE WIPED OUT. AFTER THAT, WE WILL BE TOO EXHAUSTED TO FIGHT OFF THE GUARRON ATTACKS.

- 'SO YOU AGREE TO GO TO THE SLAUGHTER?,' HIS MOTHER ASKED QUITE SADLY, HER EYES FIXED ON NOTHING.



SOMETHING BURNED MARK INSIDE, BUT HE CONTROLLED HIMSELF AND TURNED AWAY:

- LOOK AT IT THIS WAY, MUM, THE WAR WILL INEVITABLY BREAK OUT TODAY OR TOMORROW. WOULD YOU RATHER I STAND IDLY BY AND DIE UNDER THE RUBBLE OF OUR HOME INSTEAD OF DYING IN BATTLE DEFENDING IT. THAT WAY AT LEAST I WOULD HAVE THE HOPE THAT SOMETHING COULD STILL CHANGE AND THE CONFIDENCE THAT I WAS DOING THE RIGHT THING BECAUSE I WOULD BE TAKING PART IN THAT CHANGE MYSELF.

- 'YOU SEEM TO HAVE GROWN UP QUICKER THAN I THOUGHT,' HIS MOTHER PRONOUNCED IN A SLIGHTLY CHOKED VOICE.

- 'I AM PROUD TO BE THE FATHER OF A REAL MAN,' HIS FATHER STOOD UP AND HUGGED HIM.

MARK NOTICED THAT TEARS GLISTENED IN HIS EYES. HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT IF A GENERAL MOBILISATION WAS INTRODUCED THE RECRUITS WOULD BE SENT TO THE FRONT LINES AS CANNON FODDER, BUT STRANGE AS IT WAS HE LONGED FOR THAT MOMENT.

SUDDENLY THE PICTURE IN HIS MIND SHIFTED AND HE WAS TRANSPORTED TO A VERY DIFFERENT PLACE. A PLACE FAR MORE SINISTER THAN THE IDYLIC EVENING IN FRONT OF THEIR FAMILY FIREPLACE.

^^^

- 'PRIVATE LENNER, WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?,' A THICK BASS VOICE CALLED OUT TO HIS RIGHT.

HE TURNED TO SEE HIS COMMANDER, LONG JACK, WEARING A DUST AND MUD STAINED SPACESUIT AND CRAWLING ON THE GROUND LIKE A WORM, HIDING BEHIND THE CORPSES OF SOLDIERS ALREADY KILLED.

- 'I DON'T KNOW SIR, BUT THEY ARE TOO MANY. I DON'T THINK WE'RE GOING TO MAKE IT.,' SHOUTED MARK INTO THE TRANSMITTER.

- 'WHATEVER IT COSTS US, WE MUST SUCCEED. MANY OF OUR OWN DIED TO GIVE US A CHANCE TO GET OUT. WIGGLE YOUR ASS, LENNER. THAT'S AN ORDER!

- 'FUCK HIM!,' GROWLED GRANDPA JACK AS AN AUTOMATIC PLASMA BLAST SPLIT THE EARTH JUST INCHES FROM HIM.

- 'ARE YOU ALIVE, SIR?,' ASKED MARK AS IF IN A DAZE BETWEEN THE SAVAGE BLASTS HE WAS SENDING AT THE ENEMY. HE HAD HIDDEN BEHIND A LOW PILE OF STONES, WAITING FOR THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO ROLL TO HIS NEXT COVER AT THE RISK OF HAVING HIS SKULL BLOWN OPEN.

- 'SIR?,' MARK TRIED TO GET THROUGH AGAIN, AS THE RADIO HAD GONE DEAD AND A THICK FOG WAS GATHERING AROUND HIM, FORMED BY THE DUST THAT HAD RISEN.

- 'SIR, ARE YOU THERE?,' HE REPEATED AGAIN WITH A NOTE OF DESPERATION IN HIS VOICE.

- 'DAMN IT, LENNER, IT WAS A CLOSE CALL,' LONG JACK GROANED HEAVILY. 'KEEP GOING AS PLANNED.'

CHAOTIC RUNNING. WANDERING. VERTIGO. CRUMPLED CORPSES OF COMRADES. BLOOD! LOTS OF BLOOD! CORPSES OF ELOHYN WARRIORS. OR RATHER, PARTS OF THEM! SCATTERED LIKE A CARELESSLY ARRANGED JIGSAW PUZZLE, ARRANGED BY AN UNFEELING HAND THAT CARES FOR NOTHING. BROKEN WARSHIPS, COMPLETELY OUT OF COMMISSION. CRATERS FROM EXPLOSIONS. TINNITUS. THE LULLABY OF DEATH. IS IT REALLY THAT CLOSE? WHAT IS THE LINE BETWEEN REALITY AND MADNESS? OR DOES NOTHING EXIST AT ALL? IS IT POSSIBLE?

'YOU MUST SUCCEED, MARK, AT ALL COSTS. ONLY YOU HAVE THE NECESSARY QUALITIES TO ENDURE TO THE END.,' HE HEARD GENERAL WALLACE'S VOICE IN HIS EARS. 'ON THE BATTLEFIELD,

RANK DOESN'T MATTER, FOR ALL ARE EQUAL BEFORE DEATH, AND YOU HAVE NO FEAR OF IT.'

SUDDENLY SOMEONE SHOOK HIM ON THE SHOULDER. HE GASPED. IT WAS THE RAT. THEY HAD LEFT HIM ON DUTY WHILE THE OTHERS SLEPT, BUT HE WOULD SOON BE REPLACED BY ANOTHER.

- 'MARK,' HE HEARD HIS CONCERNED VOICE AND WAS SLIGHTLY SURPRISED AT HIS TONE, 'WHATEVER YOU'VE SEEN, YOU SHOULD GET SOME SLEEP. YOU CAN'T LEAVE THE GROUP WITHOUT A GUIDE. IT'S ONLY FOUR HOURS UNTIL DAWN.'

THEN FATIGUE TOOK OVER AND HE CLOSED HIS EYES. AND FOR A MOMENT, AT LEAST, HE WAS PLUNGED INTO UTTER EMPTINESS, INTO COMPLETE OBLIVION, WHERE NO ONE AND NOTHING EXISTED!

EARLY IN THE MORNING THE FIGHTERS STIRRED. ALL WITHOUT EXCEPTION WERE IN A MORE CHEERFUL MOOD THAN THE DAY BEFORE, FOR THEY NOW HAD WATER FOR ABOUT A WEEK, AND THIS, AT LEAST IN THEORY, INCREASED THEIR LIVES BY AS MUCH. THE SUN SEEMED TO BE BAKING MORE MERCILESSLY THAN THE DAY BEFORE, APPARENTLY INTENT ON MAKING UP FOR THE JOY OF EVERY DROP OF WATER THEY HAD POURED INTO THEIR WATERSKINS.

THEY HADN'T MADE IT ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE CANYON YET, BUT ACCORDING TO FATHER, THERE WASN'T LIKELY TO BE MUCH FURTHER TO THE FAMOUS LANDORIAN PASS. LENDORIAN PASS. THIS PLACE WAS SHROUDED IN MYSTERY, EVEN COMPLETE MYSTERY. VIRTUALLY NO ONE ELSE IN THE GROUP HAD HEARD OF IT BESIDES FATHER.

- 'COME ON, BOYS,' SAM WALLACE MOTIONED TO THEM, GRINNING, 'THE BEACH IS OVER.'

THE GROUP LAUGHED, GETTING HIS JOKE.

- 'IT REALLY IS TIME,' PAUL CONFIRMED. 'FATHER WILL BE OUR GUIDE, SINCE HE'S BEEN HERE BEFORE.'

- 'I'M NOT SAYING I'VE BEEN HERE EXACTLY, JUST THAT I'VE BEEN AROUND THESE PARTS,' FATHER TOSSED IN, SEEMINGLY CASUALLY, BUT IT WAS OBVIOUS HE FELT FLATTERED BY HIS WORDS.

- 'ENOUGH TALK,' RAT CUT THEM OFF QUIZZICALLY. 'DON'T YOU WANT THOSE BIRDS TO COME OUT OF NOWHERE AND RAID US AGAIN? WE'RE EASY TARGETS OUT HERE IN THE OPEN.'

THE REMAINING FEW HOURS PASSED IN NEAR SILENCE. EVERYONE HAD THEIR ASSAULT RIFLES AT THE READY AND WERE MOVING IN A TIGHT LINE, WITH THE CIVILIANS TRAILING BEHIND. STRANGE AS IT WAS, NOTHING UNUSUAL HAPPENED TO STOP THEM IN THEIR TRACKS.

AS THEY MOVED, MARK SURVEYED THE SURROUNDING HILLS OF RED SANDSTONE AND LIMESTONE CLIFFS. 'A RIVER MUST HAVE FLOWED HERE, THOUGH THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO. BUT NOW IT HAS DRIED UP, LIKE THE FUTURE OF MANKIND.'

PAUL, RAT, SAM, LONG JACK, AND FATHER PACED, THE LOOSE SAND CRUNCHING UNDER THEIR FEET. THEY ALL KNEW THAT THEIR CHANCES INCREASED THE FASTER THEY GOT OUT OF THE CANYON, BUT THE UNKNOWN THAT AWAITED THEM IN THE MYSTERIOUS PASSAGE DID NOT PARTICULARLY EXCITE THEM.

NEARLY FIVE HOURS PASSED AT A MEASURED SOLDIER'S GAIT.

- 'THERE, THAT THERE IN THE DISTANCE,' CRIED THE FATHER SUDDENLY.

EVERYONE FIXED THEIR EYES AHEAD, EVEN THE CIVILIANS WHO WERE TOTALLY FORGOTTEN BY THE GROUP. THE AIR TREMBLED WITH THE HEAVY MARANA, LIKE MOLTEN LEAD. NO MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED YARDS AHEAD OF THEM, BEHIND A SMALL SAND DUNE, WERE THE VAGUE OUTLINES OF HIGH CLIFFS. APPARENTLY THE CANYON ENDED WITH THEM. HOWEVER, A CLOSER LOOK REVEALED A RELATIVELY LARGE CAVE-LIKE HOLE THAT YAWNED DARK AND FATHOMLESS. MARK REMEMBERED HIS LESSONS ABOUT BLACK HOLES IN ASTRONOMY CLASS. THE COMPARISON WAS QUITE APT.

ACCORDING TO HIS TEACHER, CONCEPTS LIKE TIME AND SPACE SIMPLY DIDN'T EXIST THERE. HOWEVER, IT WAS QUITE DIFFICULT TO IMAGINE A BIG NOTHING, BECAUSE SUBCONSCIOUSLY THE HUMAN BRAIN WAS TRYING TO TRANSFORM IT INTO SOMETHING, TO DRESS IT UP IN SOME HUMAN NOTIONS THAT CLEARLY DID NOT CORRESPOND TO REALITY. OR WAS REALITY JUST NOT THERE?

- 'WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?,' WAS THE FIRST THING GRANDPA JACK CALLED.

- 'LET TWO OR THREE OF US GO FORWARD AND THE REST OF US COVER THEM,' SUGGESTED RAT, 'PAUL'S A GOOD SNIPER, LET HIM STAY AND WATCH OUR BACKS, THERE'S NO TELLING IF THE CALM WE'VE HAD SO FAR HAS BEEN THE CALM BEFORE THE STORM.'

THE OTHERS APPROVED THE IDEA AND PAUL, ALONG WITH GRANDPA JACK AND SAM WALLACE TOOK UP A COMFORTABLE POSITION ON THE DUNE FOR POSSIBLE OPENING FIRE. FORWARD WENT MARK, THE RAT AND THE FATHER. AFTER ALL, WASN'T FATHER IN HIS OWN WATERS? BUT THEY HAD BARELY TAKEN A FEW STEPS WHEN FATHER SAID:

- DO YOU KNOW, BASS I CATCH THAT THIS HERE IS A MINEFIELD? I HAD HEARD ONCE THAT THOSE OF ULTRA CITY WERE RATHER PECULIAR, THOUGH PEACE-LOVING, THEY LIKED TO BE QUITE SHELTERED. IF WHAT I'VE HEARD IS TRUE, THE LENDORIAN PASS WILL TAKE US CLOSE TO THE HERMETIC GATES OF THE CITY.

- 'WE'VE PLANTED OURSELVES NICELY, ALL RIGHT!,' MURMURED THE RAT IN HIS TYPICAL STYLE, 'NOW HOW ARE WE GOING TO FIND THE MINES?'

- 'THERE'S A WAY.,' FATHER STATED, NOT VERY CONFIDENTLY. 'THOUGH THERE ARE NO GUARANTEES THOUGH.'

- 'AND WHAT IS IT?,' ASKED MARK, A LITTLE NERVOUS.

- 'WELL, LET'S JUST SACRIFICE SOME OF THE CIVILIANS,' FATHER VOICED HIS THOUGHT.

EVEN THE RAT LOOKED AT HIM A LITTLE SURPRISED AND ASKED:

- 'WELL, HOW ARE WE GOING TO GET THE OTHERS TO FOLLOW US, SO WE DON'T HAVE TO KILL THEM LATER TOO? THEY MIGHT PANIC AND REFUSE TO MOVE.

- 'THEY WILL FOLLOW US WHEREVER THEY GO, THERE CAN BE NO TURNING BACK, THEY SAW VERY WELL WHAT WE LEFT BEHIND US,' FATHER ARGUED CALMLY.

HIS WORDS DEFINITELY HAD AN IMPACT ON THE OTHERS. IT REALLY WAS PURE MADNESS FOR THE CIVILIANS TO TAKE THE RETURN ROUTE ALONE, AFTER SEEING WITH THEIR OWN EYES HOW THE GROUP BARELY ESCAPED THE DANGERS AT THE COST OF SO MANY CASUALTIES. IT WAS SIMPLY UNTHINKABLE!

- 'YOU MEAN WE'RE GOING TO PUT THEM IN A COMPLETE STANDOFF?,' ASKED MARK.

- EXACTLY. THEY ACTUALLY ARE. NEITHER CAN RETREAT BACK, LET ALONE RETURN TO THEIRS. YOU KNOW THAT THE MILITARY TRIBUNAL OF IMGRADON WILL ISSUE DEATH SENTENCES TO THEM DIRECTLY. JUST THINK, IF EVEN ONE MANAGES TO GET THROUGH WITHOUT ACTIVATING A SINGLE CHARGE, THEN WE WILL VERY CAREFULLY LEAVE, TREADING RIGHT IN HIS FOOTSTEPS. MINES ARE SENSOR MINES, WE HAVE TO PRAY THAT SOMEONE DOESN'T GET A HAND OR FOOT OVER THE AIRSPACE OF ONE.

- 'IF WE'RE LUCKY, WE MIGHT HIT THE JACKPOT WITH THE FIRST ONE.,' RAT GRINNED IN HIS TYPICAL STYLE. 'AFTER ALL, THEY HAVEN'T BEEN MUCH USE TO US SO FAR.'

- 'WE'LL HAVE TO CHOOSE WHICH ONE IT'LL BE THOUGH.,' MARK ADDED. 'WE'LL RANK THEM IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE.

- 'TELL THE NEW RECRUITS TO BRING THEM HERE.,' THE FATHER TURNED TO THE RAT.

RAT RAN BACK, SIGNALING TO PAUL AND THE OTHERS WHO WERE ON THE DUNE THAT ALL WAS WELL FOR NOW.

AFTER A FEW MINUTES THE RECRUITS BROUGHT THE TORTURED CAPTIVES HOME. IT WAS ACTUALLY A DOZEN ELOHYN WARRIORS, BUT OF MINOR RANKS, THEY WERE WORTH PRACTICALLY NOTHING. GENERAL JACOB WALLACE'S REASON FOR ORDERING MARK TO LET THEM LIVE WAS MORE THAN PRACTICAL. THE THING WAS, WHEN HE AND GRANDPA JACK HAD BEEN CRAWLING AROUND XANDERAR, WHICH HAD BEEN TURNED INTO A VERITABLE BATTLEFIELD DUE TO THE CONFLICT OF THE TWO ARMIES, THE TWO OF THEM HAD KNOCKED OUT THE HEROES IN QUESTION, WHO WERE DEFENDING A SMALL FORTIFICATION WITH A LASER LAUNCHER, AND HAD TAKEN THEIR PLASMA RIFLES BECAUSE THEY NEEDED THEM DESPERATELY. OF COURSE, THEY HAD TO KILL SOME OF THEM. BUT THE REST, ON GENERAL JACOB'S ADVICE, WERE USED AS COVER SO THEY COULD GET ACROSS THE HEAVILY GUARDED BORDER WITH SYNTHROS, WHICH, IN THEORY AT LEAST, WAS KEPT AUTONOMOUS BY ELOHIARIAN TROOPS. MARK AND LONG JACK HAD TAKEN THE NAME BADGES OF SEVERAL SLAIN WARRIORS, FIGURING THAT IN THE COMMOTION THE BORDER GUARDS WOULDN'T BE SO CAREFUL. THE PLOY HAD WORKED IN THE END. THE RICKETY SPEEDER THAT OUR 'ELOHYN' FIGHTERS HAD CRAMMED INTO ALONG WITH THE REAL ONES HAD FLOWN THROUGH THE TRIPLE LASER FIREWALL, WHICH HAD BEEN BRIEFLY DISABLED BY THE NAIVE PATROLLERS WHO, AFTER A QUICK CHECK OF A FEW OF THE REAL ELOHYN FIGHTERS' BADGES, HADN'T BOTHERED TO CHECK THE REST. THIS WAS GREATLY HELPED BY THE EXPLANATION MARK HAD PUSHED, WHICH SEEMED QUITE PLAUSIBLE TO THEM. HE ASSERTED THAT GENERAL JIN PALEY, THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ELOHIAST FORCES, HAD PERSONALLY SENT THEM ON A SPECIAL MISSION TO LIAISE WITH THE UNITS OF THE SECOND ELOHIAST ARMY STATIONED ON THE SOUTHERN FRONT IN THE SYNTHROS AREA, AND THAT EVERY MINUTE WAS OF THE UTMOST IMPORTANCE IN CARRYING OUT THIS IMPORTANT MISSION.

MARK NOW RECALLED ALL THESE DETAILS AS HE SAW THE ENEMY SOLDIERS FACING HIM. THEIR APPEARANCE WAS MORE PITIFUL EVEN THAN THAT OF HIS OWN MEN, FOR THE ELOHIASTS WERE NOT RECEIVING THEIR REGULAR RATION OF WATER. THEY WERE GRIM, THEIR EYES STARING BLANKLY INTO NOTHINGNESS.

- 'AND SO, LADS,' THE FATHER BEGAN, 'WHICH OF YOU WILL PASS FIRST ALONG THE TRACK?'

AT FIRST THEY DIDN'T EVEN UNDERSTAND WHAT HE WAS SAYING, BUT AFTER A FEW SECONDS ONE OF THEM SAID TORTUREDLY:

- 'WHAT DO YOU REALLY WANT FROM US? WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU TAKING US?'

- 'WHAT'S YOUR NAME, BOY?,' ASKED MARK.

- 'WESTNER,' REPLIED THE OTHER, LANGUIDLY AND APATHETICALLY.

- 'OKAY, WESTNER, HERE'S THE DEAL,' MARK CONTINUED. 'YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT THERE'S NO TURNING BACK FOR YOU, SO I'M OFFERING YOU THE FOLLOWING DEAL THAT YOU CAN'T REFUSE. I WANT YOU TO CAREFULLY WALK THOSE TWO HUNDRED YARDS ALL THE WAY TO THAT HOLE IN THE ROCKS, CAREFULLY LEAVING DEEPER FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND, DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?'

- 'AND IF I REFUSE?,' STRETCHED WESTNER.

- 'THEN WE'LL BLOW YOUR BRAINS OUT RIGHT HERE LIKE A DOG!,' SNARLED THE FATHER, A LITTLE UNNERVED BY ALL THIS STALLING.

- 'BUT IF YOU PASS,' MARK ADDED, 'WE'LL INCREASE YOUR DAILY WATER RATION.'

THE SOLDIER LICKED HIS CHAPPED LIPS, GLANCED BACK AT HIS COMRADES, WHO HAD FIXED QUESTIONING EYES ON HIM, AND AFTER A FEW SECONDS OF INNER STRUGGLE SAID:

- ALL RIGHT, I ACCEPT.



- 'STAND BACK, BOYS,' THE FATHER MOTIONED TO THEM, 'BECAUSE THERE MAY BE A BIG 'BOOM!'

THE GROUP RETREATED BACK TO THE DUNE AND HUNKERED DOWN AWAITING THE OUTCOME.

WESTNOR STRODE FORWARD SLOWLY, PICKING THE BEST PATH. HE HAD ALMOST REACHED THE OPENING IN THE ROCKS WHEN A POWERFUL EXPLOSION TORE HIM APART. PIECES OF HIS BODY FLEW IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS AND WHERE THEY THUDDERED NEW EXPLOSIONS FOLLOWED.

MARK, PAUL, AND THE OTHERS BARELY MANAGED TO LAND BEFORE THE SHOCKWAVE REACHED THEM.

- 'FUCK HIM,' FATHER GROWLED, 'BIRDS AND CACTI WERE CHILD'S PLAY COMPARED TO THESE MINES.'

- 'LET'S HOPE MOST OF THEM AT LEAST BLEW UP,' RAT SAID IN AN ANGRY TONE. 'WHAT DO YOU THINK, GRANDPA JACK?,' HE ADDED SUDDENLY.

- 'I THINK WE'D BETTER RISK ANOTHER ONE GOING TO THE VERY END BY EXACTLY THE SAME ROUTE,' SUGGESTED GRANDPA JACK.

- 'LET US GO, DAMN YOU,' THE ELOHYNs CRIED. 'WE'D RATHER DIE BY THOSE VILE CACTI THAN SERVE YOUR FILTHY EXPERIMENTS.'

- 'THEN LET'S FINISH THIS RIGHT NOW, YEAH?,' THE FATHER PULLED DOWN THE SAFETY OF THE MACHINE GUN WITH A THREATENING GESTURE. 'WE'VE ALREADY WASTED OVER TWO HOURS ON NONSENSE.'

FACED WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF INSTANT DEATH, THE CAPTURED WARRIORS SOBERED. THERE WERE MURMURS LIKE 'WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO, SO AND SO WILL DIE!', 'LET'S SHOW THEM THAT WE ARE NOT AFRAID OF DEATH' AND SO ON. THIS WENT ON FOR A FEW MINUTES, UNTIL SUDDENLY A WISHER CAME OUT AND SAID:

- HELL, I'LL DO IT, AT LEAST I'LL KNOW I DIED LIKE A MAN.

- 'YOU JUST DO IT, FROM THEN ON YOU'LL RISE IN OUR EYES,' RAT LAUGHED IRONICALLY.

- 'IT GIVES YOU A CHANCE TO PROVE YOURSELF,' MARK ALLOWED HIM. 'THE OFFER OF WATER RATIONS STANDS.'

THE MAN SCRAMBLED DOWN THE DUNE AND LANDED CAREFULLY ON THE GROUND BELOW. A SMALL CLOUD OF DUST ROSE FROM HIS FOOTSTEPS. HE LOOKED AROUND. THE SPACE HAD DEFINITELY TAKEN ON THE APPEARANCE OF A BATTLEFIELD BECAUSE OF THE MANY DETONATIONS. SHALLOW CRATERS OF 1-2 METERS HAD OPENED HERE AND THERE DUE TO THE POWER OF THE EXPLOSIONS. THE SOLDIER WAS AWARE THAT IF HE HOOKED EVEN ONE MINE, IT WOULD BE THE LAST THING IN HIS LIFE, YET HE HAD NO CHOICE. 'YOU SERVE YOUR COUNTRY!' HIS FATHER HAD ONCE SAID. 'A MAN NEVER CRIES AND KEEPS ON GOING NO MATTER WHAT,' HE REMEMBERED HOW HE HAD ENCOURAGED HIM WHEN HE CALLED HOME ONCE A WEEK ON THE ULTRAS DURING THE FIRST AND WORST WEEKS IN THE BARRACKS. NOW HE DEFINITELY HAD TO SHOW IN PRACTICE THAT HE HAD DRAWN ON HIS PARENT'S WISDOM. PLUS HE COULD HELP HIS COMRADES SURVIVE. AFTER ALL, BY ACTING NOW, HE WOULD GIVE THEM HOPE. HE WAS AWARE OF THE PARADOX OF THE CURRENT SITUATION, FIGHTING FOR THEIR HOMELAND, THEY WOULD BE DECLARED COWARDS AND DESERTERS IF THEY SUCCEEDED IN RETURNING. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE RETURN ITSELF WAS ALSO IMPOSSIBLE.

- 'COME ON, MY BOY, WE HAVEN'T GOT ALL DAY,' HE HEARD A VOICE FROM THE HEIGHT OF THE DUNE BEHIND HIM, BUT HE COULDN'T PINPOINT EXACTLY WHO IT BELONGED TO, FOR THE TENSION WITHIN HIM WAS HAVING ITS SAY. HE COULD FEEL THE BEADS OF SWEAT TRICKLING DOWN HIS FOREHEAD AND THE BUZZING IN HIS HEAD INTENSIFYING. IT WAS AS IF EVERYTHING IN FRONT OF HIS EYES BEGAN TO HAPPEN IN SLOW MOTION AND THE PICTURE FLICKERED LIKE THE FOOTAGE ON AN OLD VIDEO CAMERA.

SLOWLY BUT SURELY HE BEGAN TO FOLLOW THE SAME ROUTE AS THE UNFORTUNATE WESTNER, WHEN SUDDENLY HE NOTICED A

HALF-ERODED MINE AHEAD OF HIM, BARELY VISIBLE BECAUSE OF THE CLODS OF SANDY EARTH AROUND IT.

HE STOPPED AND SHOUTED BACK:

- THERE'S SOMETHING HERE. IT LOOKS LIKE A SPUNDLER MODEL 392 MINE. I THINK I CAN DEFUSE IT IF I HAVE THE RIGHT TOOLS.

- 'HEY, RUSSELL, WEREN'T YOU A BOMB SQUAD?,' THE RAT TURNED TO ONE OF THE RECRUITS.

- 'I'M NOT VERY SKILLED, SIR,' THE OTHER MAN SPUTTERED, NOW OUT OF SURPRISE, NOW OUT OF FEAR THAT HE MIGHT BE BLOWN UP BY THE MINE IF HE ACCEPTED.

- 'CHARGE,' WAVED HIS HAND CONTEMPTUOUSLY AT THE FATHER, 'GIVE HIM A PAIR OF SAPPER'S PLIERS AND A CLIP FOR THE DETONATOR PIN.'

GRANDPA JACK TOOK THE THINGS, WRAPPED THEM IN A PIECE OF CLOTH, RAN DOWN THE DUNE AND CAREFULLY TOSSED THEM TO THE ELOHYN, THEN WENT BACK. AS UNNERVING AS THE WHOLE SITUATION WAS, A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF CURIOSITY HAD TAKEN HOLD OF EVERYONE.

THEY COULD CLEARLY SEE THE SOLDIER HAD HIS BACK TURNED TO THEM AND WAS FUMBLING WITH SOMETHING IN FRONT OF HIM. THEY COULDN'T CLEARLY MAKE OUT THE MINE BECAUSE OF THE PILES OF DIRT AROUND IT.

SEVERAL AGONIZING AND TENSE MINUTES PASSED. TO EVERYONE'S DELIGHT, NO DETONATION FOLLOWED.

THE SOLDIER SIGNALLLED TO THEM THAT IT WAS SAFE TO COME DOWN. OUT OF AN ABUNDANCE OF CAUTION, MARK DECIDED TO SEE IF HE WAS TRYING TO TRAP THEM AND IN HIS DESPERATION BLOW EVERYONE UP, INCLUDING HIMSELF. SO HE SENT GRANDPA JACK AND RUSSELL, WHO AFTER ALL WAS OFFICIALLY A BOMB DISPOSAL OFFICER, TO SEE IF THE MINE WAS INDEED DEFUSED.

- 'IT'S REALLY ALL RIGHT,' RUSSELL CALLED OUT. 'THE COLLEAGUE HAD DONE AN EXCELLENT JOB.'

- 'YES, UNLIKE YOU,' FATHER MUTTERED, STRIDING WITH MARK AND THE OTHERS TOWARDS THEM.

RUSSELL PRETENDED NOT TO HAVE HEARD HIM.

MARK WALKED OVER AND LOOKED AROUND THE MINE. IT WAS A ROUND PIECE OF STRANGE METAL ALLOY WITH A DIGITAL DETONATOR ATTACHED. FATHER NOTICED THE ARTFULLY CUT FIBER OPTICS CONNECTING THE DETONATOR TO THE EXPLOSIVE AND ASKED:

- HOW DID YOU FIND OUT EXACTLY WHAT MINE WAS, I'VE NEVER SEEN ONE LIKE IT?

- 'I WAS A SAPPER IN THE NINTH COMPANY BEFORE YOU CAPTURED ME,' THE SOLDIER REPLIED.

- 'YOU ARE OBVIOUSLY A VALUABLE CADRE,' NOTED WITH OBVIOUS RESPECT FATHER.

- 'YOU'VE EARNED YOUR WATER RATION, BOYS,' MARK CONFIRMED, 'AND I STAND BY MY WORD.'

- 'AND DON'T FORGET, WHAT DID YOU SAY YOUR NAME WAS?,' SUDDENLY INTERJECTED PAUL, WHO HAD BEEN SILENT ALL THIS TIME.

- 'DURNYAM,' REPLIED THE OTHER, A LITTLE SURPRISED.

PAUL MADE NO REPLY, ONLY SHOOK HIS HEAD THOUGHTFULLY. DURNYAM. THAT NAME, THOUGH DISTANT, SOUNDED FAMILIAR, BUT HE COULD NOT REMEMBER WHERE HE HAD HEARD IT...?

LOOKED AT CLOSELY, THE HOLE DIDN'T LOOK MUCH LIKE A CAVE. THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT IT THAT MADE YOUR HEART RACE AND YOUR WORLD SPIN. THE OPENING WAS AS DARK AS PITCH OR TAR, AND NO MATTER HOW HARD THE EYES STARED, THEY COULDN'T MAKE OUT ANYTHING IN DEPTH. IT WAS AS IF A THICK BARRIER

PREVENTED IT FROM HAPPENING. MARK AND THE OTHERS WERE HUDDLED A SAFE DISTANCE AWAY A FEW YARDS TO THE SIDE.

- 'WAS IT REALLY LEADING TO THE POLIS?,' THE RAT VOICED HIS CONCERNS.

GRANDPA JACK HAD MOVED CLOSER TO GET A CLOSER LOOK AT HER, BUT HE HAD HIS ASSAULT RIFLE AT THE READY. IT WAS DEFINITELY A STRANGE HOLE, NO ONE DISPUTED THAT, SO HE RETURNED TO THE GROUP, ACKNOWLEDGING THE OBVIOUSNESS OF THAT FACT.

- 'BUT ISN'T IT A PORTAL TO ANOTHER DIMENSION?,' INTERJECTED SAM WALLACE.

THE OTHERS LOOKED AT HIM IN AMAZEMENT, BUT AFTER ALL THE MISHAPS THEY COULD BELIEVE ANYTHING.

- 'ACCORDING TO THE LEGENDS,' THE FATHER BEGAN, 'THIS IS THE DREAM GATE. WHOEVER PASSES THROUGH IT SEES HIS WORST NIGHTMARES. OF COURSE THEY ARE NOT REAL, BUT ONLY A SIMULATION THAT THE ULTRAS HAVE INVENTED FOR SOME REALLY INSISTENT INTRUDER. AS YOU CAN SEE, WE HAVE ALREADY OVERCOME THREE OBSTACLES AND NO ONE CAN CONVINCE ME THAT THEY WERE AN ACCIDENT. THERE HAVE BEEN TOO MANY COINCIDENCES.'

- 'SO WHAT ARE WE GOING TO SEE INSIDE?,' MUTTERED RUSSELL THE RECRUIT. HE WAS A HANDSOME AND SLENDER YOUNG MAN, WITH A GOOD-NATURED EXPRESSION THAT SAID FROM MILES AWAY THAT HE WAS NOT BORN TO BE A SOLDIER, BUT CIRCUMSTANCES HAD MADE HIM ONE.

- 'FATHER HAS ALREADY SAID,' PAUL INTERJECTED. 'BUT I THINK IT'S POSSIBLE THAT'S NOT TRUE AT ALL. IT COULD BE A GATEWAY TO...'

- 'DON'T GET SUPERSTITIOUS, PAUL,' RAT GROWLED QUIZZICALLY, 'WHATEVER IT IS, IT'S THE WAY.'

BUT EVERYONE WAS WORRIED. THEY HAD FOUGHT MATERIAL THINGS BEFORE, AND NOW THEY WERE ABOUT TO FACE SOMETHING RADICALLY DIFFERENT - THEIR VERY FEARS.

- 'I'LL BE FIRST,' MARK DECLARED, AND HE SLIPPED INTO THE HOLE, THE DARKNESS SWALLOWING HIM.

- 'I'M COMING, MY FRIEND,' PAUL SAID AND FOLLOWED HIM.

HE WAS FOLLOWED BY RAT, FATHER, RUSSELL, GRANDPA JACK, SAM WALLACE AND THE REST...

## CHAPTER TWO: THE VISION

THE FIRST MOMENT A MAN DIES HE FEELS NOTHING. HE IS BODILESS, HE IS IMMATERIAL ENERGY IN THIS WHOLE VACUUM. HE IS EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE AT THE SAME TIME. THAT IS EXACTLY THE FEELING OF OUR HEROES. IN FACT, THEY DIDN'T HAVE THE SLIGHTEST IDEA OF EXACTLY WHERE THEY HAD ENDED UP.

- 'WHERE THE HELL ARE WE?,' BLURTED PAUL. THIS WAS QUITE UNCHARACTERISTIC OF HIM, BUT EVEN HE WAS FORCED TO ADMIT THAT THIS PLACE DEFIED ALL DESCRIPTION. THEY WERE LITERALLY IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. OR MAYBE THEY HAD ALREADY BECOME NOTHING THEMSELVES. HOW CAN ONE BECOME NOTHING? THAT THOUGHT ALONE WAS STARTLING.

- 'IS EVERYONE OKAY?,' ASKED MARK, NOT SEEING OR HEARING THE OTHERS, BUT GETTING NO ANSWER. NOT EVEN A SOUND CAME FROM HIS THROAT, AS IF HE WERE MUTE.

- 'WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON?,' THE RAT SCREAMED, REALIZING HE WAS ACTUALLY HEARING HIS OWN THOUGHTS, AND HE HADN'T EVEN OPENED HIS MOUTH.

- 'BOYS, WHERE HAVE YOU GONE?,' SCREAMED GRANDPA JACK AT THE TOP OF HIS LUNGS.

- 'WHY, THAT'S ODD,' SAM WALLACE VOICED HIS SURPRISE ALOUD.

'THIS IS DEFINITELY GOING TO BE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE,' THOUGHT FATHER, NOT MAKING A SOUND, AND EVEN IF HE WANTED TO HE FELT HE COULDN'T.

ONLY PAUL HAD SUNK INTO SUCH A REVERIE THAT HE COULDN'T EVEN THINK. IN FACT, RIGHT NOW HE COULD HARDLY DO ANYTHING.

SUDDENLY, LIKE A FLASH, A PICTURE CREPT INTO HIS MIND, THE IMAGE WAS RATHER HAZY. IT LOOKED LIKE A VIEW THROUGH A FOGGED-UP CAR WINDSHIELD. PAUL REMEMBERED THAT HE HAD SEEN SOME SIMILAR ILLUSTRATIONS IN AN E-BOOK WHEN HE WAS YOUNG. APPARENTLY HIS BRAIN WAS MAKING THAT ASSOCIATION QUITE APTLY. SUDDENLY HE SAW SOMETHING THAT WAS DEFINITELY NOT FAMILIAR TO HIM. A YOUNG WOMAN, QUITE BEAUTIFUL AND SLENDER. STRANDS OF HAIR WERE SCATTERED ACROSS HER FACE, BUT HE COULD SEE IT CLEARLY BECAUSE A BOLT OF LIGHTNING ANGRILY SLICED THROUGH THE SKY. THE WOMAN LOOKED AROUND FEARFULLY, AS IF AFRAID SOMEONE MIGHT SEE HER. BECOMING AN UNWILLING SPECTATOR OF THE WHOLE SCENE, PAUL FELT A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF CURIOSITY. HER FIGURE WAS WEARING A CAPE, NO PROTECTIVE SUIT OR ANYTHING, AND WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF A SEMI-DARK ALLEY. THE SILHOUETTE OF THE BUILDING IN FRONT OF HER LOOKED MENACING. SUDDENLY, SHE STARTED TO CLIMB THE FEW STEPS THAT LED UP TO THE FRONT DOOR OF SAID BUILDING. HER DELICATE LITTLE HAND PRESSED FIRMLY AND GENTLY ON THE HANDLE AND THE DOOR CREAKED OPEN. SOMETHING IN PAUL'S MIND SEEMED TO BREAK, AND STRANGELY WHY THAT CREAK MADE HIS WHOLE SOUL SHUDDER. WHO WAS SHE REALLY? AND WHY DID HE HAVE TO WATCH ALL THIS? BUT WHATEVER WAS CAUSING THIS VISION, IT WAS CLEAR THAT HE DIDN'T CARE ABOUT PAUL'S OPINIONS OR DESIRES. SO HE CONTINUED TO WATCH WHAT WOULD FOLLOW.

IN FACT, BESIDES BEING A BACKWATER, THE ALLEY IN QUESTION SEEMED COMPLETELY DESERTED. THE RAIN CONTINUED TO FALL. THE RAINDROPS LOOKED LIKE SHARP DAGGERS PIERCING THE DARK EARTH. THE WINDOWS OF THE BUILDING CAST A DIM LIGHT ONTO THE STREET AND LOOKED LIKE THE EYES OF SOME TERRIFYING BEAST. PAUL WATCHED AS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ACTUALLY SEEMED TO HAPPEN FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE AN ETERNITY. FINALLY THE YOUNG WOMAN CAME OUT, HOLDING HER STOMACH WITH HER HAND, OBVIOUSLY IN PAIN. EVERY MOVEMENT PRESENTED A DIFFICULTY FOR HER, AND IT WAS APPARENT EVEN UNDER THE TIGHT CAPE THAT ENVELOPED HER BODY. ONLY NOW DID IT BEGIN TO OCCUR TO PAUL THAT THE BUILDING IN QUESTION RESEMBLED A HOSPITAL. AS IF TO CONFIRM HIS FEARS, A TERRIBLE BOLT OF LIGHTNING ILLUMINATED HER SIGN, 'ST. JOSEPH'S CLINIC,' SPELLED OUT IN STRANGE AND EVEN FRIGHTENING GOTHIC LETTERS.

SUDDENLY THE WHOLE PICTURE DIMMED, LIKE A REFLECTION IN WATER THAT HAS BEEN SHATTERED BY A STONE THROWN AT IT. PAUL FELT SOME FORCE TRYING TO TEAR HIM AWAY FROM HERE. SOME DISTANT VOICE, INSISTENTLY CALLING HIS NAME, URGING HIM ON.

- PAUL, PAUL, WAKE UP, PAUL.

THE VOICE WAS STRANGELY REMINISCENT OF MARK'S, BUT DIFFERENT. PAUL LISTENED INTENTLY. NO IT WASN'T MARK'S VOICE, THERE WAS SOMETHING STRANGE AND INHUMAN ABOUT IT.

- ONLY THE PURE IN HEART COME THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE. ONLY THEY GET TO THE ABSOLUTE TRUTH.

- 'WHO ARE YOU? OR WHAT?,' THE SNIPER TRIED TO SPEAK IN A CALM VOICE. 'AND IS ALL THIS HERE REAL AT ALL?'

- 'IT COULDN'T BE MORE REAL, PAUL.,' THE VOICE REPLIED WITH A SUBTLE SNEER.

- 'WHAT HAPPENED TO MY FRIENDS?,' ZOLSKY SOUNDED A LITTLE NERVOUS NOW.



- 'YOUR FRIENDS ARE NOT YOUR CONCERN NOW, PAUL.,' THE VOICE REPLIED SERIOUSLY WITH SOME TENSION. 'BUT THEY'RE FINE...FOR NOW.'

- WHAT DO YOU MEAN?

- EVERYTHING IN ITS TIME, EVERYTHING IN ITS TIME. THE ONLY THING I CAN TELL YOU AT THIS POINT IS THAT YOUR PART IN THIS WHOLE THING MAY BE A LOT MORE IMPORTANT THAN YOU THINK.

^^^

PAUL WOKE UP IN AN UNFAMILIAR PLACE. IN FACT, HE COULDN'T EVEN TELL WHERE HE WAS, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS AWAKE. ALL AROUND HIM, HOWEVER, THERE WAS NOT DARKNESS, FRIGHTENING AND OPPRESSIVE, BUT A BRIGHT LIGHT THAT ENVELOPED HIM LIKE A THICK CURTAIN. NO MATTER HOW MANY THINGS PAUL HAD SEEN, THE CURRENT SIGHT COMPLETELY OVERWHELMED HIM. IT WAS UTTERLY UNEARTHLY, OR RATHER UNZEGANDARIAN, FOR MANKIND HAD LONG SINCE MIGRATED TO DISTANT PLANETS AND LEFT EARTH. WAS THIS THE OTHER DIMENSION THEY HAD BEEN TAUGHT ABOUT IN CADET SCHOOL WITH MARK? IN FACT, THE ELITE SNIPERS, HAD MORE INTENSIVE STUDY OF THE HISTORY OF THE UNIVERSE, AS THERE THEY STUDIED THE 26-DIMENSIONAL MODEL FOR ITS STRUCTURE, WHICH HAD LONG BEEN PROVEN. BUT IF ALL THAT WERE TRUE, THEN...

- 'THAT'S RIGHT, PAUL. NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHY ONLY YOU WENT THROUGH THE PORTAL WHILE THE OTHERS COULDN'T AND ARE NOW IN A COMPLETELY DIFFERENT PLACE. AND IT'S FAR FROM JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE SO PERCEPTIVE, PAUL. THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT YOU,' THE VOICE CONTINUED, THE SAME ONE THAT HAD SPOKEN TO HIM WHILE HE WAS...OH, DAMN, IT WAS ALL SO MESSED UP...

NO MATTER HOW MUCH PAUL LOOKED AROUND, HIS GAZE COULDN'T PENETRATE THE DENSE VEIL OF LIGHT, BUT STRANGELY ENOUGH, DESPITE ITS BRIGHTNESS, IT DIDN'T IRRITATE HIS EYES.

- 'THIS BETTER NOT BE THE AFTERLIFE,' PAUL BARELY MUTTERED, AWARE THAT THE LINE SOUNDED SOMEWHAT COMICAL.

- PAUL, PAUL...HAVEN'T YOU LEARNED ANYTHING...WHAT IS THE AFTERLIFE AND WHAT IS REALITY, WHO CAN SAY?

- PAUL STARTED TO RETORT, BUT THOUGHT BETTER OF IT AND ASKED:

- WHY DO YOU ALWAYS HAVE TO TALK IN RIDDLES? TELL ME AT LEAST ONE THING STRAIGHT TO MY FACE!

- 'I ALREADY TOLD YOU THIS THING, PAUL,' THE VOICE ANSWERED SOMEWHAT INDEFINITELY. 'WHAT ELSE DO YOU WANT TO KNOW?', HE ADDED, SOMEWHAT SUDDENLY AND MORE SOFTLY.

- WHERE EXACTLY ARE WE?

- 'ACTUALLY, WE ARE BOTH VERY NEAR AND VERY FAR FROM YOUR FRIENDS AT THE SAME TIME,' THE VOICE ADDED.

- 'I TAKE IT THAT MEANS THAT IT'S UP TO ME TO GO BACK TO THEM?,' BEGAN PAUL HESITANTLY.

- THAT'S RIGHT. YOU KNOW THAT NOTHING IS LOST IN THE UNIVERSE. AND IN FACT, AS MUCH AS YOU DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE IT, YOU'RE HALF A METER AWAY FROM MARK AND THE OTHERS RIGHT NOW, BUT YOU CAN'T SEE THEM, HEAR THEM, OR FEEL THEM...

- ALTHOUGH PAUL WAS BEGINNING TO FIGURE SOME THINGS OUT, HE STILL COULDN'T PUT THE PUZZLE TOGETHER IN HIS HEAD, BUT WHO COULD?

- 'SO MY VISION LED ME HERE?,' THE SNIPER TRIED TO CONTINUE THE INTERRUPTED CONVERSATION.

- 'NOT EXACTLY, BUT YOU COULD SAY THAT,' THE VOICE STATED CALMLY.

- AND I AM ASKED TO CHANGE SOMETHING IN THE VISION, OR RATHER TO FIND OUT WHAT INFLUENCE THE EVENTS IN IT HAVE HAD?

THE VOICE WAS SILENT, BUT PAUL TOOK THAT AS A SIGN OF AGREEMENT.

^^^

SUDDENLY PAUL FELT SOMEONE SHAKING HIM. IT WAS MARK. AND HE WAS TENSE. PAUL RUBBED HIS EYES WITH HIS HAND. THE OTHERS WERE STANDING AROUND, LOOKING AT HIM WITH SOME CONCERN, AND RAT WAS GIVING HIM A HEAD COMPRESS. HE COULD STILL SEE A LITTLE BLURRY, BUT HIS VISION SEEMED TO BE COMING INTO FOCUS. WHEN IT WAS POSSIBLE TO SEE FAIRLY CLEARLY, HE LOOKED AROUND. THEY WERE STILL IN THE DARK CAVE, BUT A BRIGHT DOT WAS VISIBLE IN THE DISTANCE.

- HE'D BEEN UNCONSCIOUS FOR ALMOST A WHOLE DAY, MARK ADDED. WE THOUGHT WE'D LOST YOU. AND WE COULDN'T GO ON WITHOUT OUR SNIPER.

- 'THAT'S RIGHT,' FATHER INTERJECTED.

SAM WALLACE, GRANDPA JACK, THE RAT, RUSSELL AND THE OTHERS PATROLLED AROUND WITH ASSAULT RIFLES IN THEIR HANDS, FOR NO ONE KNEW WHAT MIGHT BE RAINING DOWN ON THEIR HEADS.

- 'WHAT'S THE MATTER?,' SAID PAUL, WITH ANGUISH.

- 'THE DEVIL KNOWS,' MUTTERED THE FATHER, WHO IN THE EYES OF THE GROUP PASSED FOR A CONNOISSEUR OF THESE THINGS, OR AT LEAST THE IMPASSE THEY WERE IN MADE THEM THINK HE WAS, 'BUT THIS PLACE OBEYS NO LAWS OF PHYSICS, NEITHER NORMAL NOR SPECIAL PHYSICS.'

SUDDENLY WE WERE ALL JUST AS FROZEN, AS IF WE WERE HELPLESS PLAYTHINGS IN THE HANDS OF SOME HIGHER BEING.

THERE WAS A MOMENT'S SILENCE. PAUL WAS TRYING TO GATHER HIS THOUGHTS IN HIS BRAIN, FOGGY FROM THIS OVEREXERTION.

AND SUDDENLY HE UTTERED:

- I SAW IT.

- 'WHAT?,' ROARED GRANDPA JACK IN A TONE THAT MADE THE UTTERLY INNOCUOUS WORD SOUND ALMOST LIKE A CURSE.

- ACTUALLY, I DIDN'T SEE IT...I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED EITHER, BUT WHILE I WAS UNCONSCIOUS I HAD A VISION, I WAS ENVELOPED BY A WHITE LIGHT, LIKE A CURTAIN, AND A VOICE SPOKE TO ME, CLAIMING THAT I HAD A BIGGER PART TO PLAY IN THIS WHOLE THING.

IN FACT, PAUL HAD DECIDED NOT TO MENTION TO THEM THE STRANGE SCENE HE HAD WITNESSED WHILE HE HAD FALLEN INTO...GOD KNOWS WHAT.

- 'WONDERFUL BUSINESS,' SAM WALLACE MURMURED. 'MY FATHER MENTIONED THAT THE MILITARY HAD ONCE DEVELOPED A SECRET MILITARY EXPERIMENT IN MIND CONTROL. IT TOOK PLACE IN THE MYTHICAL AREA NINE.'

- 'YOU MEAN,' MARK BEGAN TENTATIVELY, 'THAT WE MIGHT HAVE ENDED UP SOMEWHERE ELSE ENTIRELY, RIGHT?'

- 'THAT'S RIGHT,' THE FATHER INTERJECTED AGAIN, 'FRIENDS, I DON'T WANT TO PUT YOU OFF, BUT IF MY ASSUMPTIONS ARE CORRECT, THE GAME COULD GET ROUGH.'

FATHER HAD NOT EVEN FINISHED HIS REMARK WHEN A STRANGE NOISE REACHED THE GROUP. IT WAS SOMETHING AKIN TO A DEVILISH CRUNCH OR CRACKLE. ONLY IT SOUNDED SOMEWHAT MUFFLED, ALMOST GENTLE EVEN. EVERYONE TOOK UP THEIR FIGHTING POSITIONS AS EFFICIENTLY AS POSSIBLE, EACH LEANING BACK

AGAINST THAT OF THEIR COMRADE. EXPECTING THE WORST. THE UNKNOWN. A WHOLE MOMENT OF ABSOLUTE SILENCE PASSED, DURING WHICH ABSOLUTELY NOTHING HAPPENED. BUT THAT MOMENT, SHORTER THAN A SECOND, SEEMED ALMOST LIKE AN ETERNITY, SO TIRED AND NERVOUS WERE THEY ALL. SUDDENLY THE NOISE REPEATED ITSELF, ONLY THIS TIME A LITTLE MORE CLEARLY.

PEOPLE'S THUMBS WERE NOW STRAINED TO THE LIMIT ON THE PLASMA AUTOMATONS' SENSOR TRIGGERS.

SUDDENLY, A MOST ORDINARY MOUSE RAN IN FRONT OF THE SPOTLIGHT. IT PAUSED, STARED IN AMAZEMENT, THEN DARTED INTO A NEARBY CREVICE IN THE ROCK.

EVERYONE BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF, AND PAUL EVEN CHUCKLED.

SUDDENLY, A MOST ORDINARY MOUSE RAN IN FRONT OF THE SPOTLIGHT. IT PAUSED, STARED IN AMAZEMENT, THEN DARTED INTO A NEARBY CREVICE IN THE ROCK.

EVERYONE BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF, AND PAUL EVEN CHUCKLED.

SUDDENLY A DECEPTIVE CALM CAME OVER THEM, A STRANGE EUPHORIA. IN SHORT, THE FEELING COULD BE DESCRIBED AS ABSOLUTE UNPLUCKINESS ABOUT THE WHOLE THING. MARK WAS GREATLY SURPRISED, AND SO WERE THE OTHERS.

- 'PUT ON YOUR HELMETS, THIS IS AN INTOXICATING GAS ZEMBRAN. IT'S TOO RISKY TO INHALE FOR LONG,' FATHER SHOUTED.

THE OTHERS, THOUGH LOST IN REVERIE, STRUGGLED TO CARRY OUT HIS INSTRUCTION, FEELING SUBCONSCIOUSLY THAT HE WAS RIGHT. ONCE THEY HAD THEIR HELMETS ON THEIR HEADS AND THE ASPIRATOR FILTERS HAD SHOWERED THEM WITH COMPRESSED AIR, THEIR HAZY CONSCIOUSNESS SEEMED TO HAVE BEGUN TO CLEAR.

- 'BUT AREN'T ALL THESE VISIONS CAUSED BY HIM?,' CHIMED IN GRANDPA JACK IN TURN.

THE OTHER FIGHTERS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER QUIZZICALLY. THEY HAD ALREADY WASTED A LOT OF TIME WANDERING AROUND THESE CAVES, BUT THE WHITE DOT IN THE DISTANCE REMAINED GLOWING, AND IT SEEMED THAT NO MATTER HOW FAR THEY WALKED, THEY WERE GETTING NO CLOSER TO IT.

- 'WE CAN'T STAY HERE,' RAT ADDED. 'WE DEFINITELY DON'T KNOW WHERE WE ARE. WE CAN ONLY FOLLOW THIS BRIGHT SPOT.'

MARK HELPED PAUL TO HIS FEET AND THE GROUP MOVED OFF.

- 'WHAT A DAMN PLACE, I FEEL LIKE PRIMAL CHAOS HAS BEEN SPAWNED HERE,' RUSSELL MUTTERED.

- 'WHAT'S A ROOKIE LIKE YOU GOT IN HIS HEAD?,' THE FATHER UTTERED IN A SLIGHTLY STRAINED TONE, BUT IT WAS CLEAR HE WAS JOKING.

- 'GUYS, WHAT IF WE JUST MOVE IN CIRCLES,' PAUL CUT IN SUDDENLY. 'MAYBE THAT VOICE OR WHATEVER IT WAS WANTED US TO FIGURE SOMETHING OUT.'

- 'IT'S WORTH THINKING ABOUT,' RAT ADDED WITH A LITTLE IRONY, SEEMING TO HAVE SLIGHTLY REGAINED HIS SPIRITS.

^^^

MORE THAN TWO DAYS PASSED, DURING WHICH THE GROUP WANDERED AROUND THESE DUNGEONS LOCATED IN THE NOTHINGNESS. STRANGE AS IT WAS, THE GROUP WENT THROUGH THE SAME ROUTE OF APPROXIMATELY TWO HUNDRED METERS AND THEN TOOK IT AGAIN.

- 'GUYS,' PAUL MUTTERED, 'I DIDN'T TELL YOU THE WHOLE TRUTH.'

- 'WHAT ELSE IS THERE TO LEARN?,' THE FATHER INQUIRED.

- APART FROM THE VOICE I MENTIONED TO YOU, I HAD A VISION OF A WOMAN GOING INTO WHAT LOOKED LIKE A HOSPITAL AND THEN COMING OUT.

- 'WELL?,' CALLED THE RAT WITH EVIDENT ANNOYANCE.

- WELL, THE WHOLE SETTING WAS LIKE SOMETHING FROM HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO, MAYBE EVEN MUCH MORE.

AT THESE WORDS OF PAUL THE WHOLE GROUP CONSISTING OF ABOUT TWENTY PEOPLE STOPPED AS IF ON COMMAND.

- 'WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL US EARLIER?,' MARK TURNED TO HIM, IRRITATION EVIDENT IN HIS VOICE.

- WELL, TO BE HONEST, IT'S THE FIRST TIME I'VE SEEN ANYTHING LIKE IT, BUT I SEEMED TO HAVE THE VAGUE FEELING THAT I'D SEEN IT BEFORE.

- 'YOU KNOW WHAT,' MARK STARTED, 'WHAT IF WE ASSUME, FROM WHAT PAUL TOLD US, THAT HIS VISIONS ARE SOMEHOW CONNECTED TO OUR MISSION.'

- 'BUT THAT'S CRAZY,' RAT MUTTERED.

THE REST OF THE GROUP LOOKED AT HIM A LITTLE QUIZZICALLY AND HE FELL SILENT.

- 'IT'S WORTH A TRY,' MARK CONTINUED. 'OBVIOUSLY THINGS AREN'T NORMAL HERE. I THINK THE LAWS OF THIS DIMENSION ARE MORE PECULIAR. 'THE DREAM GATE IS NOTHING BUT A TRIAL FOR THE MOST PURE-HEARTED. AND NOW WE'RE BEING GIVEN A CHANCE TO GET OUT. WHAT HAPPENS IF WE JUST START MOVING BACKWARDS?'

- 'WE DON'T QUITE UNDERSTAND YOU,' THE TROOP MUTTERED ALMOST IN UNISON, EXCEPT FOR FATHER, WHO SMILED SLIGHTLY AND SAID:

- IT'S CLEAR AS DAY, UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES IF A BODY MOVES AT LESS THAN THE SPEED OF LIGHT, TIME PASSES NORMALLY, BUT IF IT STARTS MOVING AT A SPEED THAT EXCEEDS IT, THEN TIME STARTS FLOWING BACKWARDS. THE POINT IS THAT THIS IS NOT AT ALL TRUE FOR BLACK HOLES, AND ALSO FOR WORMHOLES.

- 'EXACTLY!,' RETORTED MARK, BEAMING THAT THEY HAD UNDERSTOOD HIM.

THE GROUP BEGAN TO MOVE ALONG THE SAME ROUTE, ONLY IN THE OPPOSITE DIRECTION, AND THE HITHERTO UNREACHABLE WHITE DOT, WHICH APPEARED TO BE THE EXIT FROM ALL THIS NOTHINGNESS, BEGAN TO APPROACH. SUDDENLY, HOWEVER, WHEN THEY HAD ALMOST REACHED IT, A STRONG WIND BLEW UP, WHICH SEEMED UNWILLING TO LET THEM PASS THROUGH THE PASS. IT FORCED THEM TO WALK ALIGNED FORWARD TOWARDS THEIR GOAL.

- 'BOYS, HAVE FAITH, IT'S ALL IN YOUR IMAGINATION,' SHOUTED MARK.

SILENCE.

COMPLETE SILENCE.

THEN EVERYTHING SANK INTO DARKNESS AGAIN.

### CHAPTER THREE: THE GENERAL

ISONGDAR WAS DRESSED IN HIS BLACK ROBE THAT FORMED A CLOCHE AT HIS FEET. THE GARMENT IN QUESTION WAS MADE OF A STRANGE MIXTURE OF KEVLAR, KYSON, AND A FABRIC THAT DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A NAME YET, AS IT WAS STILL UNDER DEVELOPMENT. IT HAD TO BE SAID THOUGH, THAT DESPITE A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF VANITY, SOMETHING QUITE NORMAL FOR A MAN OF HIS RANK, ISONGDAR WAS NOT AT ALL A WOMANIZER, BUT ON THE CONTRARY VERY SKILLED IN MILITARY COMBAT AND DIPLOMACY.



ISONDAR WAS JUST PAST FORTY-FIVE, WHILE GENERAL PALEY WAS OVER FIFTY-FIVE, AND THIS DIFFERENCE IN AGE WAS APPARENT IN THE STARK CONTRAST BETWEEN THE GENERAL'S SILVER HAIR AND THE ADJUTANT'S STILL COMPLETELY BLACK HAIR.

- 'ADJUTANT, DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHERE THE HELL MARK LENNER IS?,' ASKED GENERAL GENE PALEY, COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ELOHIAN FORCES.

- 'THEY'VE MANAGED TO SNEAK THROUGH ONE OF OUR BORDER POSTS IN THE SYNTHROS AREA, AND QUITE BRAZENLY AT THAT,' ISONGDAR, THE ADJUTANT GENERAL OF THE WESTERN FORCES, SAID WITH OBVIOUS ANGER.

- 'IT IS A SHAME AND DISGRACE FOR OUR SOLDIERS TO LET THEM OFF IN SUCH A VULGAR MANNER,' THE GENERAL RAGED, EVEN TAPPING HIS HAND ON HIS HUGE METAL DESK MADE OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE.

- 'INDEED, SIR, YOU ARE RIGHT,' THE ADJUTANT SPOKE WITH SOME RESIGNATION, BUT NOT OUT OF SERVILITY OR SYCOPHANCY, BUT OUT OF SHEER PRAGMATISM, AS HE DID NOT WANT TO STRAIN THE GENERAL'S ALREADY STRETCHED TO THE LIMIT NERVES WITH THE SITUATION AT HAND. 'WHAT THEY HAVE DONE IS A GRAVE MISTAKE THAT MAY WELL DECIDE THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR.'

THE GENERAL RAN HIS FINGERS THROUGH HIS SHAGGY HAIR FOR A MOMENT, AS IF TO KEEP SOME THOUGHT FROM ESCAPING. THEN VERY SLOWLY HE PROCEEDED THROUGH HIS TEETH:

- ISONGDAR, EXPLAIN TO ME AGAIN HOW THE WHOLE THING CAME ABOUT, IN AS MUCH DETAIL AS YOU LIKE.

- TO THE BEST OF MY KNOWLEDGE, SIR, FROM THE INFORMATION I GOT FROM MY SPIES, MARK LENNER, PAUL ZOLSKY, AND A FEW OTHER AS YET UNIDENTIFIED PEOPLE CAPTURED SOME OF OURS AND TOOK THEIR IDENTIFICATION CARDS, THEN USED OUR SPEEDER TO GET TO THE BORDER CROSSING AND, USING THE HOSTAGES THEY TOOK AS COVER, CROSSED THE BORDER INTO UBUNDER.

- 'AND?', SAID THE GENERAL IN A TONE THAT SOUNDED SOMETHING BETWEEN MELODRAMATIC, ANGRY AND ANNOYED. 'THEN?'

- 'THEN THEIR TRAIL IS LOST,' THE ADJUTANT MUTTERED. 'I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO GET ANY FURTHER INFORMATION ON THE MATTER FROM OUR INTELLIGENCE.'

- 'BUT THE REASON WHY AN ORDINARY PRIVATE LIKE LENNER WOULD TAKE ORDINARY SOLDIERS HOSTAGE AND CROSS THE BORDER REMAINS UNEXPLAINED?', THE GENERAL RANTED.

THE ADJUTANT LOWERED HIS EYES IN SILENCE, BUT REMAINED SILENT, LEAVING THE GENERAL TO PONDER ALOUD.

- 'THE RISK IS TOO GREAT TO USE THEM IN A SIMPLE PRISONER EXCHANGE,' HE CONTINUED HIS REASONING. 'SOMETHING MUCH GREATER AND PERHAPS EVEN VITAL LIES HERE, BUT WHAT?'

- 'GENERAL, WITH ALL DUE RESPECT,' THE ADJUTANT VENTURED TO MUTTER, 'SHALL I ORDER THE SPEEDER TO BE PREPARED FOR YOUR DEPARTURE?'

PALEY WAVED A HAND. THE GESTURE WAS DIFFICULT TO DEFINE, BUT THE ADJUTANT CHOSE NOT TO PRESS THE POINT.

ON HIS WAY OUT, HE CAST A GLANCE AT THE GENERAL. HE HAD HIS BACK TO THE HYDRON DOOR THROUGH WHICH THE ADJUTANT WAS NOW LEAVING THE COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF'S OFFICE.

THE ADJUTANT WAS WELL AWARE THAT THE TWO OF THEM WERE ABOUT TO HAVE A SECURITY CONFERENCE WITH GOVERNOR GORDON ELMBAUM, WHICH COULD NOT BE DELAYED BECAUSE OF THE CIVIL UNREST THAT HAD BROKEN OUT IN THE POLIS. THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE DONE. THINGS HAD TO BE BROUGHT TO A HEAD.

^^^

GENE PALEY WAS A HEREDITARY MILITARY MAN. HIS FATHER, SIR LENWORTH IMBUS PALEY, WAS THE FOUNDER OF THE ELOHYN MILITARY IN GENERAL. AS SUCH, HE WANTED HIS SON TO CONTINUE HIS WORK AND NOT LET HIM DOWN. HE HAD A GREAT DEAL TO DO WITH THE REBIRTH OF THE MILITARY MIGHT OF ELOHY. HE CREATED THE BATTLE CORPS WITHOUT WAITING FOR ANY THANKS. HE BUILT UP THE MILITARY DISCIPLINE AND STRENGTH OF THE SOLDIERS. THE YOUNG LIONS OF IMGRADON WERE HIS IDEA! AND IT WAS ALREADY PAYING OFF!

THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT WAS AGAIN IN HIS TIME. THIS MILITARY FACILITY WAS TRULY IMPRESSIVE. EVERYTHING IN IT HAD BEEN THOUGHT THROUGH BEYOND MEASURE. IT HAD AS MANY AS SIX MAIN DOCKS FOR LAUNCHING SHUTTLES, PLUS A SPECIAL HANGAR WHERE THE SPEEDERS MAKING INTRAPLANETARY FLIGHTS WOULD STAY. NOT FAR FROM THE SPACEPORT WAS A SPECIAL PRODUCTION HALL WHERE THE SO-CALLED VOLTAN SHUTTLES WERE MANUFACTURED, AND ALSO DESTROYER-CLASS SPEEDERS. ONE OF THE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES IN THE COMBAT AIRCRAFT OF ELOHY AND UBUNDER WAS THE RADAR SYSTEM. THE UBUNDER ONES HAD A GREATER RADAR RANGE, BUT THE ELOHYN ONES WERE FAR MORE ACCURATE. IT WAS A TACTICAL ADVANTAGE PALEY INTENDED TO EXPLOIT, ESPECIALLY WITH THE ADDITIONAL DEPLOYMENT OF TROOPS INTO ENEMY TERRITORY. SOME OF THE MEDIUM-RANGE PROTON MISSILE DEVELOPMENTS WERE LOCATED THERE. DANGEROUS WEAPONS INDEED, HIDDEN DEEP UNDERGROUND IN SPECIAL HALLS.

HOWEVER, HE KNEW THAT A MAN SO SUCCESSFUL MUST CONSTANTLY MEET EXPECTATIONS. OTHERWISE THE ROAD TO DOOM WAS TOO SHORT. THERE WEREN'T TOO MANY WHO COULD ACTUALLY THREATEN HIS LIFE. BUT HE WAS ALWAYS REASSURING HIMSELF AGAINST POSSIBLE ASSASSINATION ATTEMPTS, AND THERE HAD BEEN QUITE A FEW SO FAR. AS MUCH AS HE STRUGGLED TO REMEMBER, THERE WERE SOME DISCREPANCIES BETWEEN ISONGDAR'S WORDS AND HIS ACTIONS. HE SUSPECTED HIM OF PLAYING A DOUBLE GAME WITH GOVERNOR ELMBAUM - THE

COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF ELOHY - BUT THERE WAS NO REAL EVIDENCE YET.

HE HAD SET A TRAP FOR HIS ADJUTANT AND HOPED HE WOULD BITE. THEN HE'D GET EVEN WITH HIM TOO HARSHLY.

GENE PALEY KNEW ABOUT THE HUGE WAR LOSSES ON THE FRONTS AND WAS UNDER NO ILLUSION THAT HE WAS ALREADY ON THE GOVERNOR'S LIST. WELL, MAYBE NOT TODAY, EXACTLY. MAYBE SOME OTHER DAY. BUT SOONER OR LATER HE WOULD FALL VICTIM TO HIS ENORMOUS EGO, WHICH WOULD NOT FORGIVE HIM A SINGLE TRANSGRESSION, SINCE ONLY PALEY CAME CLOSE TO HIS POWER, AND GORDON DID NOT LIKE TO SHARE ANYTHING WITH ANYONE.

GENE PALEY COULD ALSO SEE WHERE ALL THE CONFLICT WAS GOING. HE HAD SPIES EVERYWHERE. UNDER HIS PRESSURE, HE HAD ORGANIZED QUITE A FEW PURGES. VERY URGENT ONES AT THAT.

- 'ISONGDAR, YOU'RE PLAYING A DANGEROUS GAME, BUT DEFINITELY NOT WITH WHOM YOU SHOULD AND CAN GET AWAY WITH,' HE MUTTERED. 'ONLY I STILL NEED YOU TO LEAD THE GOVERNOR BY THE NOSE, OR AT LEAST TO TRY.'

HE NEEDED TO VISIT THE SPACEPORT AND CHECK ON THE PROGRESS OF MILITARY DEVELOPMENTS. THEN HE HAD TO DROP BY THE INTENDANT'S AS WELL. THE LIST WAS ENDLESS. HAD HE KNOWN WHAT AWAITED HIM, HE WOULD NEVER HAVE GONE INTO THE MILITARY FIELD. BUT HE KNEW HOW TO DO ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ELSE. AND THAT SCARED HIM. YES HE WAS A GOOD MILITARY MAN WITH REAL MERIT, BUT THE SAME BUREAUCRAT AS HIS BOSS. AND NOBODY LIKED BUREAUCRATS.

POLITICALLY HE WAS STABLE BECAUSE HE HAD MAINTAINED A RELATIONSHIP WITH ALL THE UNION LEADERS WHO SERVED THE MILITARY INDUSTRY AND WHO HAD THE MERIT OF GETTING HIM ELEVATED TO THAT POST AT THE COST OF HUGE BRIBES.

THE ADMIRAL KNEW THAT UBUNDER OUTCLASSSED THEM MILITARILY, CHIEFLY IN THEIR EXCELLENT WEAPONS, BUT IN QUANTITY THE

SUPERIORITY WAS ON THEIR SIDE. THEIR ENGINEERS HAD PUT INTO ACTION SOME NEW DEVELOPMENTS THAT HE HOPED WOULD CHANGE THE COURSE OF THE WAR.

UNFORTUNATELY, TIME PASSED, AND HE HEARD NO CONCRETE NEWS, ONLY SKETCHY RUMORS OF UTTER FAILURE, AND THAT WAS NOT GOOD. IT WAS HEADING FOR DOOM. HIS OWN DOOM. WHY DID ANYONE HAVE TO RESIST IN SUCH A WAY THAT WASN'T VERY RELEVANT. ONLY BECAUSE THERE WAS NO OTHER PERSPECTIVE. YES, PALEY WAS A PROPONENT OF MILITARY FORCE AND DOMINANCE, BUT IF MY INTERESTS WERE PRESERVED, HE WAS WILLING TO COME TO THE NEGOTIATING TABLE. TIME PASSED, AND HE HAD NEVER RECEIVED ANY REAL OFFER TO QUELL THE CONFLICT. INSTEAD, NEW FRONTS WERE OPENING UP AND HIS MILITARY FORCES WERE GASPING TO RESPOND TO THE CHANGED SITUATION. THE GENERAL WAS FAR FROM RETIREMENT AND COULD NOT PASS THE RESPONSIBILITY TO ANOTHER. EVEN IF HE WANTED TO.

HE HAD TO KEEP UP. THERE WAS NO GOING BACK. ANY DAY COULD BE HIS LAST IF SOME THINGS SLIPPED FROM HIS HANDS. BUT HE KEPT BELIEVING AND HOPING. EVERY MINUTE THE SITUATION WAS CHANGING.

TODAY HE PLANNED TO MAKE AN URGENT INSPECTION OF A COMBAT CORPS BEFORE IT LEFT FOR THE FRONT.

- 'THE SPEEDER'S READY,' ISONGDAR REPORTED AGAIN, AS MUCH TO STRAIN THE SUPERIORS. 'AFTER HE HAD GONE OUT, HE HAD CHECKED AGAIN. EVERYTHING WAS EXCELLENT AND HE HAD RETURNED TO INFORM THE GENERAL.'

- 'TELL THEM I'LL BE IN SHORTLY,' HE INSTRUCTED WITHOUT FURTHER ADO.

- 'FOURTH BATTALION IS READY FOR INSPECTION, SIR,' HE TURNED TO HIS COMMANDER.

THE SPEEDER FLIGHT TOOK NO MORE THAN HALF AN HOUR TO COVER THE THIRTY-FIVE ZEGANDARIAN MILES NORTHEAST OF THE POLIS.

NOT FAR FROM HERE WERE THE PLEXONIARS MINES, BUT THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THEM AND THE MILITARY SITE WAS NO LESS THAN EIGHT MILES - WITH THE AIR BOUNDARIES ALSO HEAVILY GUARDED.

HERE THE SOLDIERS WERE TRAINED IN THE UTMOST SECRECY. THEY GAVE THEIR BEST, BUT NONE OF THEM MADE THE FAINTEST ATTEMPT TO STAND OUT. THIS WAS THE PRINCIPLE. ON THE BATTLEFIELD ALL WERE EQUAL AND THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR SUPERFLUOUS EGO.

THE REAL REASON, HOWEVER, FOR PALEY TO COME AND INSPECT THE BATTALION WAS OF AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT NATURE. IF HE WANTED TO GET AN UPDATE ON THE SITUATION AT THE BASE, THERE WERE ENOUGH CLASSIFIED REPORTS AND NO REASON TO GO JUST LIKE THAT. HE WAS TO MEET PERSONALLY WITH A PERSON ABOUT WHOM HE HAD BEEN SUPPLIED WITH VALUABLE INFORMATION. THE PERSON IN QUESTION WAS NAMED ANDREW DISLAN AND WAS IN CHARGE OF BASE MAINTENANCE. FEW EVEN ON BASE HAD HEARD HIS NAME. HE HIMSELF TRIED TO APPEAR SO UNASSUMING AS NOT TO ATTRACT UNDUE ATTENTION. HE GENERALLY HAD A HARD TIME TOLERATING PEOPLE.

PALEY DECIDED TO MAKE A FORMAL ROUND OF THE FACILITIES AND EXAMINE THE SOLDIERS AS HE HAD PROMISED. WHILE THE ROUTINE CHECKS WERE GOING ON, HE KEPT STRUGGLING TO MEET THE TECHNICIAN IN QUESTION SOMEWHERE. YES, THE BASE WAS HUGE, BUT NOT SO HUGE THAT THEY COULDN'T FIND ONE PARTICULAR PERSON.

AFTER LEAVING HIS ADJUTANT TO DEAL WITH THE TECHNICALITIES, HE WENT TO CHECK ON THE MAINTENANCE SQUAD HIMSELF, WITHOUT AROUSING ANY UNDUE SUSPICION. EVERYTHING WAS GOING MORE THAN WELL, BUT SOMETHING HAPPENED THAT SURPRISED HIM SLIGHTLY. HE ALMOST RAN INTO THE TECHNICIAN IN QUESTION. HE MUMBLED SOMETHING THAT MADE HIM EVEN MORE EMBARRASSED, ALMOST EXPECTING A COURT MARTIAL FOR DISRESPECTING HIS SUPERIORS.

- 'ARE YOU ANDREW DISLAN?', SPOKE PALEY, QUITE FORMALLY, AS IF THE INCIDENT IN QUESTION HAD NEVER TAKEN PLACE.

- 'I AM,' HE REPLIED AS IF ON COMMAND. 'EXCUSE ME, GENERAL PALEY, FOR HAVING TO LOOK MORE AT MY FEET.'

- 'I HAVEN'T NOTICED ANYTHING WRONG,' THE GENERAL COUGHED. 'DO YOU KNOW HE WANTS TO SEE YOU AFTER ALL?'

- 'WHO ARE WE TALKING ABOUT?', HE ASKED AS IF PULLED OUT OF A DREAM.

- 'WELL, ABOUT YOUR GRANDFATHER,' MUTTERED THE GENERAL CALMLY.

- I AM AN ORPHAN, SIR.

- I UNDERSTAND YOU, BUT THINK OF YOURSELF.

- WHAT YOU SAY CANNOT BE TRUE. I'M JUST A FARMER'S SON, BEN ELIGHT. I EARNED A SCHOLARSHIP FOR THOSE QUALIFYING COURSES IN MECHANICS AND NANORBOTICS, AND SPACE WELDING. YOU SEE WHAT I DO, I JUST FIX STUFF.

- 'OH, DON'T BE MODEST. YOUR TALENTS COULD BE USEFUL TO THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR,' PALEY SAID, VERY MILDLY. 'ACTUALLY, THINGS ARE BASICALLY QUITE SIMPLE. HE JUST WANTS TO MEET YOU. JUST ONCE. IF IT DOESN'T SUIT YOU, YOU'LL LEAVE.'

DISLAN LOOKED AT HIM INCREDULOUSLY. HE COULDN'T POSSIBLY ASSUME THAT A GENERAL COULD TALK TO HIM LIKE THAT. THEIR MEETING DID INDEED TAKE PLACE IN COMPLETE SECRECY, IN ONE OF THE MOST SECLUDED HALLS OF THE REPAIR DEPOTS. THE GENERAL WORE A HYON SILENCER. BUT IT WASN'T NECESSARY. THERE WASN'T A LIVING SOUL AROUND. DISLAN HAD CRUELLY INSULATED HIMSELF AGAINST POTENTIAL HUMAN INTERFERENCE WITH HIS WORK. EVEN HIS IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR SOUGHT HIM OUT ON AVERAGE ONCE EVERY TWO WEEKS, AND THEN ONLY TO GIVE HIM A REPORT ON THE WORK HE HAD DONE.

- 'I TAKE IT YOUR DECISION IS FINAL?', HE ASKED HIM ONE LAST TIME.

- 'YES,' DISLAN CONFIRMED UNEQUIVOCALLY.

- IT IS YOUR RIGHT TO DECIDE THAT. BUT BEYOND THE FAMILY STUFF, WHICH DOESN'T CONCERN ME, LET'S CUT TO THE CHASE. WHAT ARE YOU DEVELOPING AT THE BASE?

DISLAN BRIGHTENED AND TOLD HIM VERY CAREFULLY ABOUT THE NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN TACHYON ENGINES, WHICH WERE IN A VERY EARLY STAGE, BUT THEY HAD ALREADY MADE A SHIP CAPABLE OF RUNNING ON SUCH AN ENGINE. THE PURPOSE OF THE PROJECT WAS RECEPTIVE.

- 'AND MAY I ASK THE NAME OF THIS SHIP?', QUICKLY INTERJECTED PALEY.

- NO, SIR, IT IS NOT EVEN WITHIN YOUR JURISDICTION TO GIVE YOU THAT INFORMATION.

PALEY WASN'T YESTERDAY'S MAN. THE GATO COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF OF THE ZEGANDARIA HIGH COUNCIL ALONE WAS ABOVE HIM. BUT HE WAS LONG GONE. 'BUT PERHAPS THEY MIGHT HAVE MADE THE SHIP EARLIER? WHO KNOWS?', HE THOUGHT.

BEFORE THEY PARTED, THOUGH, HE DECIDED TO ASK THE YOUNG MAN ONE LAST AND VERY UNAMBIGUOUS QUESTION.

- 'DON'T YOU FEEL ALONE AMONG THESE MACHINES? YOU COULD HAVE A MUCH BETTER FATE. 'IF YOU JUST CHANGE YOUR THINKING A LITTLE,' HE MUTTERED, TURNING AND WALKING OUT. AND NEVER SAW ANDREW DISLAN AGAIN.

ISONDAR DID NOT DOUBT FOR A MOMENT THAT ANYTHING HAD HAPPENED, FOR THE GENERAL'S FACE WAS IMPENETRABLE. THE TWO BOARDED THE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE AGAIN. BEFORE THEY TOOK OFF, HOWEVER, ONE OF THE SOLDIERS TRIED TO CATCH UP TO THEM AND HANDED SOME SMALL PACKAGE TO THE ADJUTANT.

THE TWO LOOKED AT EACH OTHER IN AMAZEMENT.



- 'OPEN IT!,' ORDERED PALEY.

INSIDE WAS A SMALL PHOTOGRAPH. IT SHOWED A BEAUTIFUL TROPICAL PARADISE, AND THERE WERE THREE PEOPLE SOMEWHERE. ONE OF THEM WAS GORDON ELMBAUM. AND NEXT TO HIM WAS GENERAL JACOB WALLACE AND HIS WIFE CATHERINE.

FORTUNATELY, ISONGDAR DIDN'T RECOGNIZE ANY OF THEM IN THE SEMANTIC PHOTOGRAPH. ODDLY ENOUGH, NOT EVEN GENERAL PALEY. EVERYTHING WAS FALLING INTO PLACE, THOUGH. A LITTLE LESS SO. GENE PALEY HAD LEARNED TOO MUCH. AGAINST TOO LITTLE.

NOW THEY COULD TAKE OFF. THE SPEEDER CARRIED THEM FAR-FAR INTO THE SKY. WHERE THE PROBLEMS DIDN'T SEEM TO EXIST. WHERE THEY COULD INDULGE THEIR THOUGHTS, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. WHERE THE LAWS OF LIFE COULD ONLY BE REDUCED TO THE DIVIDING LINE BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH. PERHAPS THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE NATURAL COURSE OF THINGS. LIFE WENT ON VERY SIMPLY, BUT PEOPLE MADE IT HARD FOR THEMSELVES. PALEY WAS NOT GRATEFUL TO FATE FOR SUCH A TURN OF EVENTS. HE HAD ACHIEVED HIS GOAL. THE SUN WAS ALREADY SETTING. FLYING SMOOTHLY, THE SPEEDER HID BEYOND THE HORIZON.

^^^

WHEN HE GOT BACK TO HIS SMALL ROOM, DISLAN BEGAN TO GO OVER SOME OF HIS FUTURE PROJECTS. THEY DID NOT BEAR DELAYING. SPECIAL ENOSANT PROJECTORS CONTAINING AN ELECTRONIC MICROFILM SAT ON THE ELATOM TABLE. THEY WERE GOING TO SUMMON HIM AT SOME TIME AND HE NEEDED TO BE WELL PREPARED. HE KNEW THAT AFTER THE VISIT, THERE WAS NO WAY HE WOULDN'T GET ANOTHER VISIT FROM A SUPERIOR WHO WOULDN'T DEMAND THE BLUEPRINTS IN QUESTION. YES, THE GENERAL WAS COMING ALONE AND WITHOUT DEMANDING ANYTHING SPECIFIC FROM HIM, EXCEPT THE VISIT IN QUESTION. YES, HE HAD REFUSED HIM.

HOW INSOLENT! BUT THAT ALONE WAS NOT ENOUGH. MUCH MORE WAS NEEDED. HE HAD TO MAKE AN EFFORT TO BE ON THE LEVEL AND MEET THE EXPECTATIONS PLACED ON HIM.

THE DRAWINGS OF THE EMZIROU WERE HIDDEN IN AN ELECTRONIC MICROFILM. THERE WERE THE DETAILS OF THE TACHYON ENGINES, DETAILED SPECIFIC INFORMATION ABOUT THE DEVICE'S HERMETIC COMPARTMENT, THE ION STABILIZERS, AND A BUNCH MORE FEATURES. DISLAN PAINSTAKINGLY SET ABOUT DESTROYING THE FILM. HE SHOULD HAVE BEEN MORE PREPARED. SURELY THEY'D SEARCH THE PREMISES SOON. AND HE TURNED OUT TO BE RIGHT.

LESS THAN TWENTY MINUTES LATER, AN EMERGENCY INSPECTION OF THE TECHNICIANS WAS ORDERED. THE ORDER CAME FROM WHO KNEW WHERE, BUT HE OBEYED IMMEDIATELY, AS HE SHOULD HAVE. THERE WAS NO MISTAKING IT! HE HAD MANAGED TO GET RID OF THE BULGING FILM. PIECE BY PIECE.

AFTER FINDING NOTHING, THE INSPECTION ENDED QUITE INGLORIOUSLY, BUT HE WAS ORDERED TO GO ANYWAY AND WAS REASSIGNED TO MAINTENANCE ON SOME INSTALLATIONS IN EARTH ORBIT. HE HADN'T MINDED ALL THAT, AS SPENDING TOO MUCH TIME IN THE SPACEPORT HAD TAKEN A SERIOUS TOLL ON HIS PSYCHE. AT LEAST THIS WAY HE WOULD HAVE TIME TO LEARN AND DEVELOP. AND THAT WAS SOMETHING HE WANTED BADLY.

THE MAINTENANCE OF THE SPACE INSTALLATIONS GENERALLY CONSISTED OF READING THE CHANGED PARAMETERS ON THE MOVEMENTS OF CERTAIN SATELLITES, AND ALSO THE ELATORIAN ANTI-RADAR SYSTEM, WHICH WAS SUPPOSED TO NEUTRALIZE SOME PARTICULAR PROBLEMS THAT WERE PRESENT. SO FAR, DISLAN HAD ALWAYS CONSULTED A NUMBER OF EMINENT SPECIALISTS. NOW HE WAS JUST GOING TO STAND IN THEIR PLACE. IT WAS AS SIMPLE AS THAT. SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD.

THE NEXT DAY HE WENT THROUGH THE NECESSARY BRIEFING. THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT WAS NOW A PART OF HIS PAST. PERHAPS A NOT SO PLEASANT PART!

DISLAN BOARDED THE SHUTTLE THAT HAD BROUGHT HIM TO THE SPACEPORT. THIS TIME IT WAS TO TAKE HIM INTO EARTH ORBIT. AS HE FIXED HIS GAZE ON THE SHRINKING SILHOUETTES AND THE TINY WIGGLING MEN HURRYING TO COMPLETE THEIR TASKS, IT CROSSED HIS MIND THAT HE HADN'T MADE MANY SERIOUS FRIENDSHIPS, LET ALONE ANY, IN ALL THE TIME HE'D BEEN HERE. HE WASN'T GOING TO MISS ANYONE.

THE COMMAND SECTION ORDERED SOMETHING BEFORE THE APPARATUS TOOK OFF. DISLAN UNDERSTOOD IT. LATER, IT TURNED OUT THAT THEY'D BEEN GIVEN FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS TO STAY IN CLOSE ORBIT LONGER THAN PREVIOUSLY PLANNED. IT WASN'T A PROBLEM FOR HIM. AFTER ALL, HE WAS GOING TO BE TINKERING WITH HIS BELOVED MACHINES AND EQUIPMENT. UP THERE IN THE SKY, IN OPEN SPACE, HE WOULD BE MUCH CLOSER TO GOD!

THE SHUTTLE WAS FLYING FAR, FAR AWAY. DISLAN MENTALLY REVIEWED THE KNOWLEDGE HE FELT HE NEEDED FOR HIS NEW ASSIGNMENT. HE WAS USING EVERY SECOND TO LEARN AND GROW. SOMETHING FEW WERE ACTUALLY CAPABLE OF DOING.

A BRIEF ORB OF LIGHTNING FLASHED BEFORE THEY ENTERED THE ATMOSPHERE. TO THE TECHNICIANS, IT WAS A SIGN OF GOOD OMEN. CLEARLY HIS NEW FIELD WAS GOING TO BE A SUCCESS. A THRILL OF ANTICIPATION CAME OVER HIM.

SOME OF THE PLANET'S METEOROLOGISTS GAVE A RATHER STRANGE DESCRIPTION OF WHAT WAS TO COME. THE PRESENCE OF GLOBULAR LIGHTNING WAS AN OMEN, AS THOSE STRANGE BALLS OF LIGHT WERE DEFINITELY SPARKING THE IMAGINATION. EVEN IN THE ADVANCED FUTURE, SCIENTISTS HAD NO PRECISE EXPLANATION FOR THE ORIGIN OF THIS PHENOMENON. THEIR THEORIES IN THIS RESPECT CONTRADICTED EACH OTHER EXCEEDINGLY. ACCORDING TO SOME, THEY EVEN ORIGINATED IN THE BOWELS OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA.

DISLAN THOUGHT ABOUT IT AND TRIED TO TAKE STOCK OF HIS ENTIRE LIFE SO FAR. HE WAS THE MOST ANTI-SOCIAL PERSON THAT COULD

POSSIBLY EXIST IN THE UNIVERSE. PERHAPS TO SOME HE WAS EVEN AN ARROGANT AND NASTY BASTARD, DONNING THE MASK OF HUMILITY THAT ENSURED HIS SURVIVAL IN THE SO-CALLED SOCIETY. HIS INABILITY TO TOLERATE THOSE AROUND HIM HAD LED HIM TO CHOOSE THIS PARTICULAR PROFESSION. NO MATTER WHAT WE SAY, HE WAS HELL-BENT ON SURVIVING IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING AND EVERYONE. HE WAS BORN STUBBORN. AND HE WAS USED TO DOING HIS OWN WORK. WELL, FOR SOME THINGS, AT LEAST FROM A PROFESSIONAL STANDPOINT, HE COULD MAKE AN EXCEPTION. THE WELDING OF THE ELATOR RADAR SYSTEM COULD HARDLY BE ACCOMPLISHED BY A LONE MAN DUE TO THE NATURE OF THE ACTIVITY. HE WAS WELL AWARE THAT HE HAD SOME CHANCE TO IMPROVE HIS PEOPLE SKILLS. BEFORE HE HAD BOARDED THE SHUTTLE, THE HIGH COMMAND HAD GIVEN HIM A SPECIAL ELECTRONIC SEAL OF 'GOOD', WHICH WAS A KIND OF RECOGNITION. HE HAD NO RIGHT TO BE ANGRY WITH ANYONE.

WHEN EVERYTHING HAD SHRUNK AS FAR AS IT COULD HE REALIZED CLEARLY THAT HE WAS ALREADY FAR ENOUGH AWAY FROM PEOPLE AND THEIR PROBLEMS. HE HAD TO MEET ENNIO HAMMER, THE CHIEF ENGINEER OF THE SO-CALLED 'SPACE RING', WHO COULD HELP HIM IN SOME WAYS. HE HAD ENOUGH RECOMMENDATIONS TO DO SO. THERE WAS ALSO A SPECIAL ELECTRONIC IDENTIFICATION RING BECAUSE IN THE RECENT PAST SOME POLITICAL CRIMINALS HAD HIJACKED ONE OF THE SHUTTLES AND 'BLOWN' IT TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT.

THE FLIGHT WAS TAKING A LITTLE LONGER THAN PLANNED. THE SHUTTLE CROSSED THE STRATOSPHERE AND DIRECTLY ENTERED THE SO-CALLED EXOSPHERE. THERE WAS NO DOUBT ABOUT ONE THING, HOWEVER. THERE, SOMEWHERE, LAY THE KEY TO ITS SUCCESS. DISLAN HAD TAKEN THE NEW OPPORTUNITY AS A PROMOTION OF SORTS AND DIDN'T GRUMBLE. IT WAS TIME TO SEE THE STARS HE HAD DREAMED OF FOR SO LONG HIDDEN IN HIS DUSTY AND STUFFY QUARTERS MANY METERS UNDERGROUND. IT WAS TIME TO EXPLORE NEW HORIZONS!

## CHAPTER FOUR: THE COSMIC SECOND RING

THE COSMIC SECOND RING WAS A WELL-CONCEIVED DEFENSIVE INSTALLATION LOCATED IN NEUTRAL SPACE - BEYOND THE PLANET'S SO-CALLED EXOSPHERE. GOVERNOR ELMBAUM HAD BUILT IT AS WELL. IT HAD COST THE TAXPAYERS TOO MUCH. SEPARATELY, ITS CONSTRUCTION HAD BEEN ACCOMPANIED BY NOT A FEW POLITICAL SCANDALS. BUT ONE THING WAS CERTAIN - SHE WAS DOING HER JOB PERFECTLY. AND OUTSIDERS WERE FORBIDDEN TO STICK THEIR NOSES IN THERE. ONE OF THE MOST COMMON COMPLAINTS WAS THE GOVERNOR'S MONOPOLY OF POWER OVER THIS FACILITY. BUT THE PROTESTS WENT ON DEAF EARS.

AFTER THE NOT-SO-GREAT FORMALITIES, DISLAN WAS INTRODUCED TO HIS NEW EMPLOYERS. ENNIO HAMMER WASN'T EXACTLY HIS TYPE, BUT HE WASN'T TOO PICKY - AS LONG AS THEY DIDN'T INTERFERE WITH HIS WORK AND, ESPECIALLY, HIS PERSONAL SPACE.

THE FIRST THING HE DID WAS WALK THE ENTIRE BASE. THE SPACE INSTALLATIONS WERE INTERCONNECTED BY EQUANADIUM HOSES THAT LOOKED LIKE SOME SORT OF 'SPACE GUTS'. THEY HAD GIRDLED THE INDIVIDUAL MODULES OF THE ENTIRE SYSTEM. 'WHAT A ROMANTIC ATMOSPHERE TO WORK IN,' THOUGHT DISLAN, ENJOYING HIS OWN ODD SENSE OF HUMOR. CLEARLY THIS WAS WHERE HE BELONGED!

THE FIRST ASSIGNMENT HE GOT WAS MANNING THE RADAR SYSTEM'S RELATIONAL SOUND TRANSLATORS, WHICH WERE SOMETIMES USED IN CASE OF NEED BY SOME STRAGGLING COMBAT SPEEDER PILOTS WHO HAD GONE INTO CLOSE ORBIT.

WITH THE ZEAL OF A PROFESSIONAL, DISLAN BEGAN TO TINKER AND FIX ANY IRREGULARITIES AND MAKE ANY ADJUSTMENTS HE DEEMED NECESSARY. IT DIDN'T TAKE HIM TOO LONG TO DEAL WITH THESE PROBLEMS. THE THING THAT BOTHERED HIM, HOWEVER, WAS THE COMPLETE LACK OF ANY SIGNS OF LIFE. NOT FOR ANYTHING ELSE, BUT HE EXPECTED ENNIO HAMMER TO FILL HIM IN ON SOME MORE OF HIS DUTIES.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE HE APPEARED AS WELL. HE WAS A DIGNIFIED MAN WHO CERTAINLY KNEW WHAT HE WAS ABOUT. BESIDE HIM STRODE A YOUNG WOMAN. NO OLDER THAN TWENTY-FIVE.

DISLAN BOWED HIS HEAD RESPECTFULLY. STILL, SENIORITY WAS SENIORITY. HE ALSO HAD TO ADMIT THAT THE OLDER MAN MIGHT BE OF USE TO HIM.

- 'ANDREW DISLAN,' HE MURMURED QUIETLY.

- 'I AM,' HE REPLIED.

- 'I HOPE OUR STATION APPEALS TO YOU, AS NEW RECRUITS RARELY COME HERE,' THE DIGNIFIED MAN CONTINUED. 'YOU MUST NOT FEEL PARTICULARLY FLATTERED TO BE DEALING WITH A VARIETY OF THINGS THAT ARE FAR BENEATH YOUR ACTUAL ABILITIES. WE WILL TRY TO GIVE YOU WORK THAT WILL DEVELOP YOU AND KEEP YOU WITH US.'

- 'I APPRECIATE YOUR GESTURE,' DISLAN WAS TOUCHED, DESPITE THE DIFFICULTY OF EXPRESSING HIS EMOTIONS.

- 'OF COURSE LET ME INTRODUCE YOU TO THIS LADY FIRST. SHE IS MY WIFE. MIERU\*, MEET MR. TECHNICIAN. YOU ARE OUR GUEST TONIGHT. BESIDES THE TWO OF US, THERE ARE ONLY TWO OR THREE SHIFTS OF TECHNICIANS HERE. AND AS YOU CAN SEE, IT'S PRETTY LONELY AS IT IS.

- 'I'M HARDLY THE BEST COMPANY, YOU MUST HAVE HEARD OF ME,' DISLAN WHINED.

- NO NEED TO BE MODEST. WE ALL HAVE OUR FAULTS. THAT DOESN'T ENTER INTO MY WORK. YOU'RE A WONDERFUL PROFESSIONAL. BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY YOU CAN HOLD YOUR TONGUE,' HE SAID CONFIDENTIALLY.

- 'THIS SEEMS TO ME A PRELUDE TO SOME SECRET YOU ARE ABOUT TO CONFIDE IN ME,' DISLAN BEGAN DISTANTLY.

- 'THAT'S RIGHT, YOUNG MAN,' WAS THE REPLY.

THEY SAT DOWN TO EAT IN A SPECIAL DINING-ROOM, WHERE THE COURTEOUS HOSTS TREATED DISLAN. HE DID NOT CONDESCEND AND DINED WELL. THE ATMOSPHERE WAS SEEMINGLY RELAXED, BUT HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT BEHIND THOSE WELL-INSULATED WALLS OF KEVLARITE WITH A COATING OF HYON FIBER, THINGS WOULD BE DISCUSSED THAT COULD BE EXTREMELY DANGEROUS.

- LOOK, WE DIDN'T CALL YOU IN TO FIX ANY WIRES OR RELAYS. YOU HAVE SOMETHING MUCH MORE IMPORTANT TO DO THAN THAT.

DISLAN HAS TURNED ALL EARS. HE HAD TO BE MORE THAN CAREFUL, ESPECIALLY SINCE HE WAS WELL AWARE THAT IF HE SCREWED UP, HE MIGHT NEVER GET THAT CHANCE TO LEAVE THE PLANET AGAIN. HE'D BE TRAPPED BETWEEN FOUR WALLS FOR THE REST OF HIS LIFE FIXING VARIOUS MECHANISMS.

- 'BOY, YOU WEREN'T SENT HERE BY ACCIDENT. SO I AM AMICABLY ADVISING YOU TO THANK FATE FOR THIS CHANCE,' BEGAN ENNIO HAMMER CALMLY. 'YOU ARE EXPECTED TO JAM THE SPEEDERS' RADARS DURING THE BATTLE, WHICH HASN'T EVEN STARTED YET, BUT WILL DEFINITELY BE INEVITABLE AFTER A WHILE. THIS IS HOW WE WILL PROTECT THE CAPITAL CITY OF IMGRADON.'

- 'OKAY, BUT LET ME ASK YOU SOMETHING TOO.,' DISLAN SNORTED SLIGHTLY. 'DOES GOVERNOR ELMBAUM HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH SENDING ME HERE?'

- 'THE GOVERNOR IS PERSONALLY CONCERNED FOR YOUR SAFETY,' HAMMER VENTURED TO SAY.

- 'IS THAT SUPPOSED TO FLATTER ME?,' COUNTERED DISLAN.

- 'PERHAPS A LITTLE AT LEAST,' ENNIO SMILED. 'BUT YOU SEEM TO WANT TO BE AWARE OF YOUR DUTIES HERE, DON'T YOU?'

- 'YES,' THE TECHNICIAN REPLIED CURTLY.

- 'YOU'LL SOON HAVE IT ALL SORTED OUT IN YOUR HEAD. AND NOW YOU CAN GO AND GET SOME SLEEP.'

ALTHOUGH SHE WAS IN THE ROOM WITH HER HUSBAND AND GUEST, THE PETITE MIERU WAS SIMPLY INCONSPICUOUS. BUT STILL SHE REMAINED A TRUE LADY. WELL MANNERED AND RESERVED. SHE HAD AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE WHOLE PLAN. THEIR REAL GOAL WAS TO DIG OUT THE SECRET INFORMATION ABOUT THE BATTLESHIP UNDER DEVELOPMENT. DISLAN HAD NATURALLY THOUGHT OF THIS LONG AGO, BUT HE WAS PLAYING THE FOOL TO BUY TIME.

HIS ISOLATION HERE WASN'T GOING TO LAST FOREVER AFTER ALL. SOMEHOW HE MIGHT STILL COME OUT OF THE SITUATION WITH DIGNITY. HE WONDERED, THOUGH, IF THE CONSTRUCTED SUPER-SHIP WAS THE ONLY REASON HE WAS HERE, OR WAS SOMETHING STILL LEFT UNSAID?

DISLAN WONDERED WHAT KIND OF PSYCHE THE INHABITANTS OF SUCH A PLACE HAD. NOT EVERYONE WOULD LAST SIX MONTHS OR A YEAR HERE. AND SOME HAD LIVED HERE ALMOST A QUARTER OF THEIR ENTIRE LIVES UNTIL THE NEW SHIFT OF TECHNICIANS ARRIVED.

TOO MANY PICTURES AND TOO MANY EVENTS MINGLED IN HIS MIND. HE HAD BARELY SURVIVED PLAYING HIS ROLE AS A HARMLESS TECHNICIAN. HE DIDN'T BOTHER ANYONE. HE WAS JUST DOING HIS JOB. THERE WERE SO MANY INTERESTED IN HIM FAILING. BUT HE WASN'T FAILING. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WAS QUIETLY AND PEACEFULLY PROGRESSING IN HIS WORK. AT LEAST FOR NOW. SOMEWHERE THERE IN HIS EARS RAGED THE SOUND OF DEATH, WHICH HAD ESCAPED BY SOME MIRACLE. HE'D HEARD THAT PALEY DIDN'T FORGIVE ANYONE. THERE MUST HAVE BEEN SOME VERY



SPECIFIC REASON FOR SPARING HIM. KNOWN TO SOME, BUT UNKNOWN TO DISLAN.

DISLAN MENTALLY TRIED TO IMAGINE HOW LONG IT WOULD TAKE HIM TO GET USED TO LIVING IN A PLACE LIKE THIS. MAYBE FIVE MONTHS AT LEAST. HE WASN'T THE QUICKEST TO ADJUST, BUT HE DEFINITELY KNEW HOW TO MANAGE TO GAIN FOLLOWERS. IT WAS NO COINCIDENCE THAT ANDREW DISLAN WAS THE BEST. THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT HIM. SOMETHING THAT COULD MAKE ANYONE HELP HIM WHEN THEY SAW HIM FEELING THREATENED. AND HE WAS STARTING TO FEEL THAT WAY.

AFTER DINNER, ENNIO CALLED HIM OVER TO SHOW HIM AROUND HIS DOMAIN. OFF THEY WENT AGAIN ON THE EQUANATI 'GUT'. THEY WALKED FOR SOME TIME UNTIL THEY CAME TO A PARTICULAR DOOR. IT WAS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS. WITH A SLIGHTLY DARKER OBSIDIAN COLOR AND A SPECIAL CARD THAT WAS NEEDED TO OPEN IT.

- 'HERE WE ARE,' ENNIO ENCOURAGED HIM AND OPENED THE DOOR.

DISLAN GASPED. A VERITABLE GARDEN IN THE MIDDLE OF SPACE, AND NOT JUST ANY PLANTS GROWN IN ETONIAN GLASSHOUSES OR PURE IMITATIONS OF SUCH, BUT AN ALMOST PRISTINE FOREST. SOME RARE PLANT SPECIES WERE EVEN VISIBLE TO THE NAKED EYE. IT WAS HARDLY TOO BIG, MAYBE NO MORE THAN A HUNDRED SQUARE METERS OR A LITTLE MORE, BUT IT WAS STILL IMPRESSIVE. HE HAD HEARD OF SUCH A THING BEFORE, BUT HAD NEVER SEEN IT WITH HIS OWN EYES.

- LOOK, YOU'RE NOT HERE TO LOOK AT MY PLANTS, YOU'RE HERE TO BE MY EYES AND EARS TO WHAT'S GOING ON ON THE SHIP. I KNOW SOME ARE TRYING TO PREPARE MY DEATH AS COMMANDER BECAUSE THIS FACILITY COULD DECIDE THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR. THIS HAS BEEN BREWING FOR FAR TOO LONG, BUT STILL.

- 'I WILL KEEP YOUR SECRET,' DISLAN REPLIED, NEVER TAKING HIS EYES FROM HIS.

- 'YOU'LL FIND OUT THE REST LATER,' ENNIO SAID CRYPTICALLY.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE SECRET ROOM

ENNIO HAMMER WAS A DIFFERENT TYPE COMPARED TO DISLAN, BUT INWARDLY HE FELT SOME NEED TO GUIDE AND PROTECT HIM, OR AT LEAST HE INSISTED THAT IT BE SO.

DISLAN HIMSELF DIDN'T MIND. HE DIDN'T WANT TO MISS HIS CHANCE, WHICH WAS SHAPING UP TO GIVE HIS LIFE SOME MEANING.

DISLAN WAS FORCED TO ADMIT THAT THEY HAD BEEN TOO LENIENT WITH HIS CHARACTER, GIVING HIM A CHANCE TO PROVE HIMSELF IN SUCH A RESPONSIBLE POSITION. HE WAS SURE THEY KNEW A LOT MORE ABOUT HIM THAN THEY WERE LETTING ON. THEY JUST SORT OF FORGAVE HIM, BUT EVEN IF IT WAS JUST FOR THE SAKE OF THE SECRET DEVELOPMENTS OF A SHIP LIKE THE EMZIROU, IT STILL DIDN'T ADD UP. THEY COULD HAVE JUST INQUIRED ABOUT THE OTHER DESIGNERS WHO WERE MORE OR LESS ON HIS LEVEL AND PUT THE PUZZLE TOGETHER TOO EASILY. WHY HIM? EVEN IF THE GOVERNOR HAD STOOD UP FOR HIM, MANY OF THE THINGS WERE TOO WELL ARRANGED.

HE WENT BACK TO HIS SETTLED ROOM. HE HAD NO INTENTION OF PROTESTING THE NEW PLACE'S WAYS, AS HE DIDN'T USUALLY COMPLAIN. HE TRIED TO FIND THE NECESSARY ARGUMENTS FOR WHAT HE WAS INTERESTED IN AND FAILED AGAIN.

HE HAD ALREADY FALLEN INTO A HALF-SLEEP WHEN HE FELT...SOME SCRATCHING, LIKE SCRAPING...IT LASTED A FEW SECONDS...HE FELL ASLEEP AGAIN...THE SCRAPING CONTINUED...THERE WAS NO DOUBT...SOMETHING WAS HAPPENING ON THE OTHER SIDE...BUT WHAT...

DISLAN SAT UP...THEY HAD TAKEN HIS WEAPON BEFORE HE EVEN LEFT. EACH TECHNICIAN HAD A LASER CUTTER. JUST IN CASE. THEN THEY PUT A SPECIAL CHIP ON HIM TO MAKE SURE HE DIDN'T LEAVE THE BASE. VERY STRANGE.

DISLAN SAW MIERU STANDING IN THE DOORWAY, MORE TEMPTING THAN EVER. SHE QUIETLY WALKED IN TO HIM.

- MY HUSBAND IS OLD AND SICK. EXPENSIVE MEDICATION BARELY KEEPS UP HIS DECEPTIVE GOOD LOOKS. HE CAN'T COPE WITH EVERYTHING HERE. DON'T LISTEN TO WHAT HE'S TELLING YOU AT ALL. BUT THERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT YOU.

DISLAN LISTENED TO HER AS IF SPELLBOUND. HE COULDN'T TAKE HIS EYES OFF HER.

HER VOICE WAS LIKE HONEY. AND HER FIGURE SEEMED TO DISSOLVE INTO THE DARKNESS.

- THE GOVERNOR IS NOT THE MAN WHO SENT YOU TO US. THAT WAS ARRANGED BY GENE PALEY. THIS TRUMP CARD COULD DECIDE THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR.

- 'I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND,' DISLAN CALLED RELUCTANTLY.

- HE THOUGHT ABOUT WHY YOU WERE SO IMPORTANT. IS IT JUST BECAUSE OF YOUR SKILLS AS A TECHNICIAN OR IS THERE A SECRET LYING IN THERE SOMEWHERE THAT YOU DON'T KNOW?

DISLAN WAS SILENT. HE'D BEEN THE VICTIM OF BACKSTABBING MORE THAN ONCE. BUT STILL.

- 'LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR ORIGINS,' MIERU CALLED, 'IT HAPPENED NOT SO LONG AGO. BEFORE THE WAR FOR AU KAKTIR. GOVERNOR ELMBAUM IS YOUR GRANDFATHER. AND YOUR FATHER IS VIAR, THE WARDEN OF LABOR COLONY 206. YOU'VE BEEN WELL HIDDEN, BUT IT'S GETTING DANGEROUS FOR YOU NOW. GENE PALEY REALIZED THE ONLY WAY TO KEEP YOUR FATHER IN LINE WAS TO SEND YOU TO US. BUT HE MISSED ME. YOU KNOW WE WOMEN ARE

GIFTED WITH A FINE SENSITIVITY. AH, YOU, MR. DISLAN, WILL HELP ME, AS IN FACT I AM HELPING YOU. OF COURSE, YOU'LL GET YOUR SHARE OF THE EARNINGS. YOU WILL NOT UPSET THE ENEMY'S SPEEDERS, BUT ELOHIA'S SPEEDERS.'

DISLAN LISTENED AND DID NOT BELIEVE. IT DIDN'T EVEN SOUND GOOD EVEN IF IT WAS A JOKE. HE TURNED PALE.

- AT THE APPOINTED TIME YOU WILL BE BROUGHT TO THE COMMAND ROOM, BUT EVERYTHING MUST BE BETWEEN THE TWO OF US. IF WE ARE DISCOVERED, WE WILL BE KILLED IMMEDIATELY. AND YOU WILL SAY GOODBYE FOREVER TO THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY.

- 'WHY ARE YOU DOING ALL THIS?,' THE TECHNICIAN TURNED TO HER.

- LET'S JUST SAY I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF THE CORRUPTION IN IMGRADON, IT'S TIME FOR THINGS TO STOP HERE. MY MOTHER SUFFERED BACK DURING THE LAST WAR IN AU KAKTIR. SHE PERISHED BENEATH THE RUINS OF SOR IN TUM CATHEDRAL.

DISLAN NODDED SILENTLY. THAT MEANT 'YES!'

THE TWO OF THEM EXITED THE STATION AND WALKED ALONG THE INTERTWINED EQUANAT 'GUTS'. THEY LOOKED LIKE FELLOW TRAVELERS, OFF ON A JOURNEY. THEY PASSED THROUGH ALL SORTS OF ROOMS. ONE WAS FULL OF EMBOSAT COILS, WHICH WERE THEMSELVES IN TERRIBLE DEMAND IN THE ZEGANDARIAN MARKET. IT IMMEDIATELY CROSSED DISLAN'S MIND THAT THEY WERE STOLEN, AND THAT WASN'T BY STATUTE. IN THE NEXT CHAMBER, SPECIAL HYON BREAKERS WERE PLACED, WHICH FURTHER ENSURED THE JAMMING OF SOME OF THE SIGNALS. IT HAD TO BE TOUCHED CAREFULLY. DISLAN WAS AMAZED THAT THERE WAS NO SECURITY AT ALL. APPARENTLY HIS COMPANION HAD ISSUED SOME SORT OF ORDERS. THE ALL TOO DISTINCT PRESENCE OF SULPHUR COMPOUNDS MADE EVERYTHING SEEM VERY STRANGE. THE TECHNICIAN DIDN'T THINK MUCH OF IT. HE HAD ALREADY MADE HIS PROMISE - NOW IT WAS TIME TO TREAD VERY CAREFULLY. THEY

CAME TO A ROOM FULL OF AILERON ROPES HOLDING UP A CERTAIN OBJECT THAT WAS QUITE BULKY.

- 'IT'S WHAT'S CALLED AN ANTI-RADAR ACCELERATOR,' MIERU HASTENED TO EXPLAIN. 'IT CONVERTS FREQUENCIES AND RETURNS PRECISELY DEFINED DISCRETE VALUES TO THE PILOTS. IN OTHER WORDS, THERE'S NO WAY THEY CAN BE SURE WHICH WAY THEY'RE FLYING WITHOUT PROPER CONFIRMATION FROM US.'

- 'THAT SOUNDS INTERESTING,' DISLAN REPLIED, STROKING HIS BEARD. 'SO WHY IS EVERYTHING WORKING OUT THIS WAY?'

- IT'S TOO LIKELY THAT SOMEWHERE OUT THERE THE EXCESSES ARE BEING HACKED AND COPIED,' MIERU SUGGESTED.

- NOT IF WE JUST MAKE A LAST-MINUTE CHANGE TO THE PARAMETERS OF THE ENTIRE MACHINE BEFORE THE NEW SHIFT.

- 'THEY DO A CHECK EVERY TIME BEFORE THEY TURN IT ON,' SHE INTERJECTED.

- 'SOME OF THESE SPECIALISTS MIGHT JUST MISS SOMETHING,' HE COUGHED QUIETLY AND GOT TO WORK.

THE SECRET WOULD BE BETWEEN THEM. THEY RETURNED THE SAME SILENT WAY THEY HAD COME AND DIDN'T AROUSE ANYONE'S SUSPICION.

- 'YOU'RE A BRAVE WOMAN,' SAID DISLAN. 'YOUR KINDNESS TO ME WILL BE REWARDED AND YOU WILL HAVE YOUR REVENGE. BUT REMEMBER ONE THING - IT IS YET TO BECOME TERRIBLE FOR ALL THOSE WHO DARE TO FLY IN THE SHARED AIRSPACE OVER THE ELANDON FIELD. THEN WE'LL FIGURE OUT HOW TO LEAVE THE BASE.'

THE WAY BACK WAS FAR EASIER. THEY DIDN'T UTTER A WORD. MIERU QUIETLY WENT BACK TO HER HUSBAND. SHE KNEW ALL TOO WELL WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN IF THEY DISCOVERED SHE HAD HELPED DISLAN. AND DISLAN HIMSELF KNEW THAT A MAN LIKE HAMMER WOULDN'T COMPROMISE AND SEND HIM DIRECTLY WITH A BURIAL

CAPSULE, WRITING THAT HE HAD MYSTERIOUSLY DISAPPEARED INTO DEEP SPACE.

SOMEWHERE IN THERE, THE IDEA FLASHED THROUGH HIS MIND THAT HE HIMSELF WAS TO BLAME FOR HIS OWN SITUATION. ALONE. YEAH SOMEONE SEEMED TO BE HELPING HIM OUT FROM BEHIND HIS BACK. BUT HE WAS MAKING MISCHIEF AFTER MISCHIEF. MAYBE THAT SOMEONE WAS GOING TO GET TIRED OF HELPING HIM. DISLAN REALIZED HOW MUCH MIERU HAD DONE FOR HIM. THIS WOMAN HAD SACRIFICED ALMOST EVERYTHING FOR A STRANGER WHO COULD POSSIBLY DO WHAT SHE HAD ASKED HIM TO DO. DISLAN WASN'T AN EXPERT ON ANTI-RADAR ACCELERATORS, BUT WITH HIS INNATE INTELLECT, HE'D GOTTEN THE JOB DONE. EVERYTHING SEEMED TO BE FALLING INTO PLACE. ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING THINGS, THOUGH, WAS THE TECHNICIAN'S DETACHMENT FROM REALITY. HE KNEW HE HAD DONE THE JOB BETTER THAN ANYONE. SOMEWHERE IN THERE, SOMETHING IN HIM BROKE. HE WAS WELL AWARE THAT TOO MUCH NOW DEPENDED ON MIERU'S DISPOSITION. SHE HAD UNINTENTIONALLY, OR PERHAPS QUITE DELIBERATELY, BECOME SOMETHING OF A PATRON OF HIS. HE HAD TO NOT LET HER DOWN.

^^^

DISLAN PRETENDED TO BE DISTRACTED AND UNPREPARED EXPERTLY, THOUGH HE WAS PERFECTLY AWARE OF WHAT HE HAD TO DO. IT WAS PART OF HIS REPERTOIRE AS A HIGH LEVEL ARTIST. IT WAS HOW HE SURVIVED AMONG THE MASS OF PEOPLE. BUT OF COURSE THAT WOULD ONLY BE UNTIL HE WAS DISCOVERED. AND THAT WAS INEVITABLY GOING TO HAPPEN. SO HE HAD TO PLAY HIS CARDS RIGHT.

AFTER THEY PARTED WITH MIERU, HE PRETENDED TO SLEEP AND SLEPT LIKE A BATH. HE HAD TO BE FRESH FOR THE NEXT DAY. THEN HE WOULD GO THROUGH A SERIES OF SHORT TRAINING SESSIONS AND BE INDUCTED AMONG THE TECHNICIANS AS A SENIOR TECHNICIAN FIRST RANK.

HE REALIZED THAT MIERU HAD HELPED HIM GET WHERE HE WAS GOING. THAT SIMPLE TRUTH BURNED HIS BRAIN. A WOMAN WHO HAD HELPED HIM BEFORE SHE EVEN SAW THE BENEFIT OF HER ASSISTANCE WAS AN INVALUABLE ALLY, BUT AN EVEN MORE FORMIDABLE POTENTIAL ENEMY.

THE TECHNICIAN CRINGED AT THE THOUGHT THAT TIME WAS PASSING IN SOME VERY STRANGE WAY. IN HIS THOUGHTS, EVERYTHING SEEMED TO BE A MESS. ONE BIG MESS.

ENNIO HAMMER GREETED HIM AT MORNING OPS WITH A PLEASANT EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE AND NO PARTICULAR WORRIES. EVERYTHING WAS AS IT SHOULD BE. NO BETTER - NO WORSE. BUT DISLAN SECRETLY FELT LOST.

HAMMER INTRODUCED THE TECHS TO THEIR NEW BOSS. DISLAN WAS GOING TO BE IN CHARGE OF EVERYTHING WITH ONLY SIX PEOPLE PLUS TWO SUPPORT STAFF. HE'D HANDLE IT NATURALLY. THERE WASN'T AN OUNCE OF DOUBT. BUT SOMEWHERE IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND A STRANGE REASONING WAS PROCESSING. WHAT WOULD HAPPEN IF SOMEONE JUST PULLED THE COORDINATES AND MIXED THEM WITH FAKE ONES? THAT WOULD CAUSE TREMENDOUS DAMAGE TO EVERYONE. IRREPARABLE DAMAGE!

HE STARTED TO EXPLORE THIS POSSIBILITY OF SABOTAGING THEIR ACTIVITIES AS WELL, AS HE WANTED TO GET IN MIERU'S EYES THAT HE MIGHT AS WELL ACT IN A SELF-SYNDICATED MANNER. FOR BETTER OR WORSE.

HAMMER KEPT EXPLAINING TO THE TECHNICIANS ABOUT HIS VAST EXPERIENCE, HIS MANY QUALIFICATIONS, AND ON AND ON. HE JUST COULDN'T SHUT UP.

- TAKE A GOOD LOOK AT HIM. THIS IS THE BEST TECHNICIAN ON THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA. A NATURAL TALENT. I'M JUST FLATTERED THAT HE EVEN STOPPED BY. ISN'T THAT RIGHT?

- 'HURRAH,' THE TECHNICIANS ROARED, LIKE A MILITARY UNIT ON A PHYSICAL EXERCISE.

ONLY NOW DID DISLAN FEEL IN HIS OWN WATERS. AND HE STOPPED CARING ABOUT EVERYTHING. HE JUST REALLY STOPPED CARING. THE PEOPLE'S SPEECH WAS LIKE A BUZZING SOUND TO HIM, CRASHING AGAINST THE SIDES OF HIS HELMET. HE FELT LIKE A DRUNK, OR MORE LIKE A SLIGHTLY SLEEP-DEPRIVED PERSON. THE SOUND WAS PRACTICALLY TRANSMITTED ON THE SUITS INTERNAL FREQUENCIES, BUT IT STRUCK DISLAN THAT SOMEWHERE IN THERE SOMETHING HAD BROKEN. IT WAS THAT SOMETHING THAT MADE HIM READY TO LEARN AND EVOLVE AGAIN.

THE FOLLOWING DAYS PASSED IN TRAINING AND DRILLS. SOME OF THEM WERE NOT TO THE LIKING OF DISLAN, WHO HAD A VERY DIFFERENT ROUTINE IN THE PAST. EVEN THE CREW OF BARELY A DOZEN OR SO SEEMED LIKE A CROWD TO HIM. BUT WITH TIME HE WAS ABLE TO GET TO KNOW THEM AND EVEN GROW ATTACHED TO MOST OF THEM. THEY HAD QUITE SIMILAR INTERESTS, BUT WHAT SET THEM APART FROM DISLAN WAS THE RESPECT AND LOVE THEY HAD FOR THEIR HOME PLANET. IT UNITED THEM AND WAS COMPLETELY UNDERSTANDABLE. SOMEWHERE OUT THERE IN ALL THE COMPLEX TANGLE OF SOCIAL INTERRELATIONSHIP HE WAS HAVING A HARD TIME FINDING HIS TRUE PLACE. TOO COMPLICATED EVEN. A LOT HAD BEEN LEFT UNSAID BETWEEN THEM ALL THIS TIME. NOT THAT DISLAN WAS SOME KIND OF A TEMERUT WHO COULDN'T WIN PEOPLE OVER. BUT HE HAD A RATHER SELECTIVE STRATEGY IN HIS CHOICE OF FRIENDS. IT DEFINED HIM AS AN INDIVIDUAL.

IT WAS THEIR CUSTOM TO GET TOGETHER AND GET DRUNK WHILE HAMMER WASN'T LOOKING. INTERESTINGLY, THEY BREWED A SPECIAL DISTILLATE THAT CONTAINED ZOMBIE SALTS AND COMBINED WITH A FEW OTHER INGREDIENTS COULD MAKE THEM EXPLODE. BUT THEY NEVER ABUSED THE AMOUNT OF THIS DRINK. THEY WERE VERY CAREFUL. STILL, THEY ENJOYED THEMSELVES TO THE FULLEST.

DISLAN PRETENDED TO DRINK, AND POURED THE DISTILLATE INTO A SPECIAL SPONGE UNDER HIS SPACESUIT. THAT WAY HE COULD OBSERVE AND APPRECIATE THE VARIOUS FOIBLES OF HIS SO-CALLED 'FRIENDS'. AND THEY HAD THEM IN ABUNDANCE.



ONE OF THE TECHNICIANS EVEN HAD A HABIT OF PISSING HIMSELF, SOMETHING THAT GENUINELY AMUSED THE OTHERS.

HE BECAME AN UNWITTING WITNESS TO THEIR GLOATING AGAINST HAMMER. OF THEIR LATENT HATRED AGAINST HIM. WHEN THEY MADE HIM JOIN IN, HE ALWAYS DEFLECTED THEIR SUGGESTIONS IN A WAY THAT DIDN'T MALIGN HIM IN THEIR EYES OR TURN THEM AGAINST HIM.

HE HAD TO DO MIERU'S BIDDING. THIS WOMAN KNEW WHAT SHE WANTED. SHE ALSO KNEW HOW TO ACHIEVE IT. SHE KNEW SO MUCH. AND SHE WAS SO INDISPENSABLE. HE WAS AWARE OF THE WELL-KNOWN TENDENCY OF MEN TO PUT THE WOMAN THEY ADMIRER ON A PEDESTAL. BUT IN THIS CASE, DISLAN VIEWED HER MERELY AS A STEP OR LINK IN HIS OWN DEVELOPMENT.

DISLAN WAS ONLY WAITING FOR THE OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO GET AT THE MACHINE AGAIN. HE'D HIDDEN THE DRAINED INFORMATION IN A VERY TARKATHIAN WAY. HE'D ANTICIPATED ALL OF THIS IN ADVANCE. EVEN IF THEY DID MAKE A CHECK, AS HE HAD ALREADY UNDERGONE AT URUS ONX, HE WOULD NOT BE STOPPED.

BUT THEN SOMETHING UNEXPECTED HAPPENED.

^^^

IN THE MORNING THE TECHNICIANS STARTED TO CHANGE. THEY SUSPECTED NOTHING OF DISLAN'S NIGHT ADVENTURE. NOTHING COULD EVEN HINT WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TOO SOON. FIRST THEY PERFORMED THE STANDARD FACILITY CHECK. THEY CHECKED ALL THE FREQUENCIES. THEY EVEN CHECKED FOR TACHYON-DETECTING MICRO-DETECTORS. EVERYTHING LOOKED MORE THAN FINE. NO PROBLEMS WERE BEING REPORTED. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING IN THERE SOMEWHERE THAT WAS DISTURBING. THROUGHOUT THE NIGHT SHIFT, NO ONE REMEMBERED EXACTLY WHAT HAD HAPPENED. LOOKED AT FROM THE SIDE, IT WASN'T MUCH. THERE HAPPENED TO BE SOME PEOPLE ASLEEP ON WATCH, AS THE

SPACE SECOND RING WAS BASICALLY A STATIONARY SPACESHIP WITH VERY SPECIAL FUNCTIONS. THE CULPRITS USUALLY RECEIVED RATHER HARSH PUNISHMENTS. SOME OF THEM EVEN GOT THEIR HEADS SPLIT OFF. NO BURIAL CAPSULES WERE WASTED ON THEM. ABSOLUTELY NONE. BECAUSE IT JUST WASN'T NECESSARY. THE FACILITY WAS BROUGHT INTO READINESS STEP BY STEP. SOME OF THE FREQUENCIES AT FIRST REFUSED. BUT A LITTLE WHILE LATER, EVERYTHING SEEMED PERFECTLY FINE. NOW THE TESTS COULD BEGIN.

WHERE IN JEST WHERE IN TRUTH THE TECHNICIANS WIPED THEIR SWEATY BROWS. METAPHORICALLY SPEAKING, SINCE IN OPEN SPACE, THEIR BODIES DID NOT SWEAT DUE TO THE PRESENCE OF COMPLEX MECHANISMS IN THEIR SPACESUITS.

HOWEVER, ONE OF THE RECRUITS NOTICED SOMETHING RATHER UNUSUAL. AND CALLED OUT TO THE OTHERS. WHATEVER ELSE HE MIGHT SAY, DISLAN WAS A BIT OF A DILETTANTE, AND IN THAT LINE OF THOUGHT HE HAD MADE A SMALL BUT SIGNIFICANT OVERSIGHT. HE COULD HAVE PREJUDGED QUITE A FEW OF THE SHIP'S FATES.

SINCE MIERU HAD LULLED THE GUARDS TO SLEEP WITH A SPECIAL SERUM SHE HAD PREPARED HERSELF AND INJECTED INTO THE SUIT'S EMONATHIUM AIR MIXERS, SOME OF THE RECRUITS HAD BRUISED FACES AND LOOKED AS IF THEY WERE DYING.

DISLAN HAD BEEN FORCED TO HURRY AND HAD FORGOTTEN TO RETURN THE SCANNER'S DATA HISTORY TO THE LAST BLANK ENTRY. THAT WAS TO SAY, THERE WAS EXACTLY ONE BLANK RECORD LURKING SOMEWHERE IN THE VAST DATABASE. A MANUALLY RUN CHECK MIGHT HAVE MISSED IT. BUT WHEN THE MACHINE CHECK WAS RUN, IT DIDN'T.

THIS MORNING, HOWEVER, THE TECHNICIANS WERE IN A HURRY BECAUSE THEY HAD TOO MANY OBLIGATIONS AND THIS OMISSION WENT UNNOTICED. SO FAR.

THEY SHOULD HAVE STARTED WITH THE CODED FREQUENCIES OF THE PILOTS WHO WERE TAKING OFF. THEY RELIED ON THAT INFORMATION TOO MUCH. THEY HAD TO GET IT ON TIME AND IN THE APPROPRIATE READY FORM. THEN SOME OF THE WELL-TRAINED EXPERTS COULD ADJUST TO THE SITUATION AND ENCRYPT THE FREQUENCIES FURTHER.

ENNIO HAMMER WAS DARTING THIS WAY AND THAT LIKE A HORNET, READY TO STING ANYONE WHO MADE EVEN THE SLIGHTEST MISTAKE. BUT EVERYONE WAS DOING THEIR JOB PERFECTLY. SOMEWHERE IN THERE SOMETHING VERY UNUSUAL HAPPENED. ONE OF THE TECHNICIANS WITH A SLIGHTLY BRUISED FACE COLLAPSED. INSTANTLY THEY RUSHED TO HIS AID. BUT HE COLLAPSED AND GASPED. HAMMER ORDERED AN INSTANT INVESTIGATION. THE DYING MAN'S BODY WOULD BE RELEASED INTO OPEN SPACE, AS WAS HIS ORDER, BUT NOT BEFORE AN AUTOPSY WAS PERFORMED. THE CAUSES OF DEATH WERE TO BE WORKED OUT IN MINUTE DETAIL.

ON THE SPACE SECOND RING THEY HAD MODERN HOSPITAL EQUIPMENT. THERE WAS WHAT THEY USUALLY CALLED AN ESONIAN SCANNER SOMEWHERE. IT MADE IT POSSIBLE TO PICK UP ALL SORTS OF DEVIATIONS FROM THE NORM. EVERYTHING WAS SLOWLY FALLING INTO PLACE. BUT THE SCANNER HAD MALFUNCTIONED TWO DAYS AGO AND NOW THEY WERE FIXING IT. SO THE CORPSE JUST ENDED UP IN THE SHIP'S MORGUE.

ENNIO HAMMER WAS FURIOUS AS HE IMMEDIATELY SUSPECTED A CONSPIRACY. AND MAYBE EVEN A LEAK OF INFORMATION RELATED TO THE POSITION OF SOME OF THE CREW. WHAT COULD HAVE CAUSED IT? HE COULDN'T SUSPECT DISLAN, WHO HAD ONLY ARRIVED YESTERDAY. HE COULDN'T, AND HE SHOULDN'T HAVE. MIERU ALSO SEEMED TO TRUST HIM COMPLETELY. WHO, THEN, HAD STIRRED UP THE WHOLE MESS?

FOR AN OLD DOG LIKE HIM, THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT SUCH A THING WAS HARDLY THE WORK OF A LONE MAN. IT JUST WASN'T POSSIBLE. IT WASN'T TOO HARD TO GUESS THAT PERHAPS SOME OF

THE EQUIPMENT IN THE COMMAND ROOM HAD BEEN TAMPERED WITH. BUT WHICH ONE, EXACTLY? AND HOW?

HE DECIDED TO CONDUCT HIS OWN INVESTIGATION, BUT ONE THAT WOULDN'T INTERFERE WITH THE OFFICIAL ONE. IT WOULD ALL COME OUT SOONER OR LATER. HE WAS ASTUTE ENOUGH IN THAT RESPECT. THE STAKES WERE ENORMOUS. BUT AGAIN, HE DIDN'T SUSPECT DISLAN, AS IT WAS TOO OBVIOUS. IT JUST SEEMED RIDICULOUS. OF COURSE, ENNIO WAS GOING TO CHECK OUT THAT VERSION TOO THOUGH. BUT A LITTLE LATER.

AFTER HE FINISHED THE BRIEFING, HE DECIDED TO QUESTION THE TECHNICIANS ABOUT WHAT THEY HAD SEEN OR HEARD, BUT NO ONE KNEW ANYTHING.

THEY REPORTED TO HIM THAT SOME OF THE SHIPS HAD DEPLOYED IN THE HIGHER AND FOGGIER LAYERS OF THE ATMOSPHERE DUE TO THE PILOTS' TEMPORARY ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH UNSUCCESSFUL COMMUNICATION WITH THE SPACE SECOND RING'S COMMAND CENTER. IF THINGS WEREN'T TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION, IT WAS HIGHLY LIKELY THAT THERE WOULD BE CASUALTIES. AND LOTS OF THEM.

HAMMER'S RESPONSIBILITY WAS ENORMOUS. HE HAD TO DO SOMETHING. IMMEDIATELY!

THE FIRST THING HE DID WAS GO TO THE MORGUE AND CHECK THE CORPSE. ACCORDING TO THE READINGS OF THE NANOPROBE AS WELL AS THE QUANTUM COMPUTER WITH MEDICAL FUNCTIONS, NOTHING SPECIAL HAD HAPPENED EXCEPT THAT THE LEVEL OF PENTANOL IN THE VICTIM'S SYSTEM WAS ONLY SLIGHTLY HIGHER THAN NORMAL. AGAIN, THIS WAS NOT EVIDENCE OF AN OLD HOUND LIKE HAMMER. THEN SUDDENLY HE SAW SOMETHING STRANGE. A SMALL, BARELY NOTICEABLE HOLE ON THE VICTIM'S SPACESUIT.

- 'THERE, WE'VE FOUND SOMETHING AFTER ALL,' HE MUTTERED AS IF TO HIMSELF.

HE TURNED BACK AND TRIED NOT TO AROUSE ANY SUSPICIONS. HE ANSWERED HIS SUBORDINATES' QUESTIONS MONOSYLLABICALLY AND LOOKED DISTRACTED.

MIERU, HOWEVER, DID NOT LOSE SIGHT OF HIM. HE APPEARED SLIGHTLY TENSE TO HER, BUT HIS EXPRESSION DIDN'T SUGGEST HE SUSPECTED HER, LET ALONE DISLAN. STILL, HAMMER COULD REVEAL THEM SOON ENOUGH.

^^^

- 'THEY'VE ATTACKED THE REFINERY! IT'S ALL IN FLAMES!,' SHOUTED SOMEONE ON WATCH.

IT HAD HAPPENED ON THE NINETY-THIRD DAY OF DISLAN'S STAY IN THE SPACE SECOND RING, TO BE EXACT. HE HAD ALREADY FULLY ADAPTED TO HIS NEW ENVIRONMENT. NO ONE HAD YET BEEN ABLE TO DISCOVER WHAT THEY HAD DONE, BUT HAMMER WAS NATURALLY STILL STEWING, THOUGH NOT SO OPENLY. HE KNEW THAT IF HE CAUGHT THE CULPRIT, HE WOULD KILL HIM WITH HIS OWN HANDS.

- 'THE WORKERS WOULD DIE! INTERON FUEL SUPPLIES COULD BE IN JEOPARDY!,' THE TECHNICIANS SHOUTED, SHAKING THEIR SPACESUIT HELMETS IN SURPRISE.

THE TEAMS MOBILIZED TO RESPOND TO THIS WHOLE EMERGENCY. THERE WAS NO DOUBT.

NEVERTHELESS, DISLAN CLEARLY FELT THAT PERHAPS NOW WAS HIS TIME. IT WAS IN ORDER TO TAKE THIS RARE CHANCE AND STRIKE SOME BLOWS AT SOME POINTS OF THE ENEMY DEFENSE WITHOUT ANYONE NOTICING - AT LEAST NOT AT FIRST. EVERYONE WAS SHUFFLING AROUND, TRYING TO GIVE IT THEIR BEST SHOT. DISLAN REMEMBERED THAT THE ONLY ESCAPE ROUTE BEFORE HE WAS DISCOVERED, WHICH HE DEFINITELY WOULD BE AFTER USING THE MACHINE A SECOND TIME, WAS TO GET HOME TO ONE OF THE RESERVE PODS. HOWEVER, THERE WERE ALMOST NONE IN THE

SPACE SECOND RING. THE FACILITY ITSELF ONLY HAD FOUR SPARE ESCAPE PODS, AND THEY WERE ONLY AVAILABLE IN AN ALCOVE UNDER THE COMMAND BAY. DISLAN WANTED TO BE SURE HE COULD ESCAPE, BUT IT WAS TOO LIKELY THEY WOULD SHOOT HIM DOWN EVEN IF HE TOOK OFF. THE SITUATION WAS RELATIVE. AND HE HAD TO CONSIDER ALL POSSIBLE RISKS.

INSTANTLY THE GENERAL MOOD SHIFTED. ALL THIS SHOULDN'T HAVE HAPPENED. DISLAN ACTED AS IF HE WERE IN A DREAM. HE DIDN'T CARE AT ALL. AT ALL. HE WAS DETERMINED TO PUNISH THOSE BASTARDS.

HE WENT TO THE ANTI-RADAR ACCELERATOR AND SURREPTITIOUSLY INSERTED THE WRONG ENTRIES INTO THE MISSING CELL HE HAD SUPPOSEDLY ACCIDENTALLY ERASED THE PREVIOUS TIME. THIS WAS DEFINITELY GOING TO CHANGE THE RULES OF THE GAME. THE ENTIRE MATHEMATICAL PARADIGM DEPENDED ON THE SHIFTED COEFFICIENTS ASSOCIATED WITH THE FUNCTION RESPONSIBLE FOR AIMING THE WEAPON.

THEN HE ALSO TRIED TO REDIRECT SOME OF THE POWER OF THE MAIN GENERATOR AND AMPLIFY ITS POWER. ONCE THE DIRECTION CHANGED A LOT OF LIVES WOULD DEPEND ON HIS GOOD WILL. HE WOULD AT LEAST BE PLAYING THE ROLE OF A GOD FOR A BIT!

ACCORDING TO THE INFORMATION RECEIVED, THE REFINERY CATCHING FIRE WAS JUST A PRETEXT FOR SOME OF THE TROOPS TO BE STATIONED OUTSIDE THE CITY FOR REASONS UNKNOWN. THE DEPLOYMENT OF THIS SECOND FRONT SEEMED A BIT ILLOGICAL TO DISLAN, NOT FOR ANY OTHER REASON, BUT BECAUSE THE FACILITY WAS A KEY SITE THAT HAD DETERMINED THE SUPPLY AND DEMAND OF INTERRON FUEL UNTIL VERY RECENTLY.

ENNIO HAMMER, BY CHANCE, WAS A LITTLE OFF TO THE SIDE AND DIDN'T NOTICE DISLAN. FOR THE SECOND TIME HIS LUCK WAS WORKING. HE WAS SURE THERE DEFINITELY WOULDN'T BE A THIRD.

SOMEWHERE OUT THERE WAS THE VASTNESS OF SPACE. THE SOURCE OF ALL THIS CHAOS. THE VERY BEGINNING OF CO-CREATION. DISLAN WAS IMMERSED IN IT THOUGH ABOARD THE SPACESHIP.

SOON HE HAD SET EVERYTHING UP. THE TECHNICIANS GOT THE INSTRUCTIONS THEY NEEDED FROM HIM. AND THEN HE REALIZED HOW WRONG HE HAD BEEN. IT HAD ALL BEEN A SET-UP. OR SO HE THOUGHT AT FIRST.

ENNIO HAMMER HAD DECIDED TO REMOVE IT IN A VERY SUBTLE WAY. HE'D PROBABLY EVEN LET IT SLIP AWAY WITH ONE OF THE SHUTTLES. THE ONLY REASON WAS THAT IF HE TOUCHED IT, HE WOULD BE HELD ACCOUNTABLE FOR HIS ACTIONS TO THE GOVERNOR, AND THAT SIMPLY MEANT DEATH. INEVITABLE DOOM! NO, HE WAS GOING TO GRANT HIM THE RIGHT OF FREE WITHDRAWAL. MIERU WAS IN MORTAL DANGER. HE DIDN'T REALIZE HE WAS BEGINNING TO LOVE THIS WOMAN. NOT WITH THE LOVE OF A KID, BUT WITH THE WARM AFFECTION OF A MAN WHO HAD SEEN AND JUDGED THE CHARACTERS OF THOSE AROUND HIM. HE HAD TO FIGHT FOR HER. HE HAD TO WIN FOR HER, BUT ALSO FOR HIMSELF. THAT WAS THE CLINCHER. HE DID NOT HAVE TO THINK HIMSELF A HERO! BUT JUST TO GIVE HIS ALL SO THEY COULD BOTH LIVE. TO LIVE TOGETHER. AND TO SHARE THE REST OF THEIR LIVES. SHE HAD TO SURVIVE. THEY BOTH HAD TO SURVIVE.

HE TRIED TO FIND HER, BUT SHE WAS NOWHERE TO BE FOUND AROUND THE SHIP. IT WAS ALL APPARENTLY ARRANGED THAT WAY. ENNIO HAMMER HAD DONE HIS JOB PERFECTLY. JUST HOW WELL-MANNERED HE WAS!

HE REMEMBERED THE SECRET GARDEN. THE DOOR WAS SLIGHTLY AJAR. HE DIDN'T JUST WALK IN, HE BARGED IN. SOMEWHERE IN THERE, BEHIND ALL THAT VEGETATION, HE FOUND HER. HER FRAIL BODY WAS STILL WARM. HER EYES WERE CLOSED. TEARS DRIPPED FROM HIS EYELIDS. HE FELT LOST FOR HER DEMISE. HE FOUND A SMALL NOTE THAT SHE HELD IN HER HANDS THAT SAID, 'THANK YOU

FOR TEACHING ME TO LIVE. A MOMENT WHEN I WAS FREE TO DEFINE MY LIFE, INDEPENDENT OF MY HUSBAND. YOUR MIERU. I LOVE YOU!'

THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND HIM. CLEARLY THEY WEREN'T GOING TO LET HIM IN AFTER ALL. HE HAD DONE ENOUGH DAMAGE TO MANY DIFFERENT SPEEDERS. AT A ROUGH ESTIMATE, THEY'D PROBABLY BEEN MORE THAN NINETY. AND THAT MEANT A LOT.

- 'I'M NOT GOING TO LET YOU PLAY ME, TECH DISLAN. YOU'VE ALREADY DONE A LOT OF MISCHIEF AND EVEN STRIPPED ME OF MY WIFE. AND I'M AN OLD MAN AND IT'S A BIT LATE TO LOOK FOR A NEW ONE,' CAME A SLIGHTLY HOARSE BUT WELL-MANNERED VOICE.

DISLAN HAD LITTLE DESIRE TO TURN, BUT HE DIDN'T WANT HIS OPPONENT TO THINK HIM A COWARD.

- I ONLY SHOWED YOU MY GARDEN BECAUSE I KNEW YOU'D GET THIS FAR. YOU WOULDN'T HAVE GIVEN UP THE SHIP'S PLANS FOR THE WORLD. BUT THAT HASN'T MATTERED IN A LONG TIME. DO THE SENSIBLE THING. BUT NOW YOU'LL TIGHTEN THE NOOSE AROUND YOUR OWN NECK.

- 'THE RESERVE CAPSULE,' HE WHISPERED, GRABBING MIERU'S CORPSE. HE WOULD NOT LEAVE HIS BELOVED EVEN IN THE HOUR OF HER DEATH.

HE WAS AT THE OTHER END OF THE GARDEN, HIS WOULD-BE PURSUERS ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE METERS AWAY. HE HAD TO OUTFRAN THEM.

^^^

THEY WERE JUST APPROACHING HIM WHEN HE CAUGHT SIGHT OF A SMALL DOOR, HALF HIDDEN BY THE SURROUNDING LUSH VEGETATION. HE DECIDED TO RISK IT, EVEN IF HE ENDED UP IN A HALL WHERE HE WOULD FALL VICTIM TO DECOMPRESSION. HE SIMPLY PUSHED IT OPEN. EVEN TRIED TO KICK IT. THE DOOR WAS FIRMLY



BOLTED. IT HAD NO EFFECT. HE ONLY HAD A FEW SECONDS LEFT BEFORE HE WOULD BE CUT DOWN BY HAMMER'S MEN, WHO, IN ADDITION TO LASER CUTTERS, CARRIED PNEUMATIC ELORIUM HAMMERS WITH WHICH TO CRUSH HIM LIKE PYTHIUM. SUDDENLY, THOUGH, TIME SEEMED TO STAND STILL. IT LASTED FOR LESS THAN A SECOND.

IN HIS HEAD, HE HEARD MIERU'S VOICE, 'YOU WILL BE SAVED, BELOVED.'

THE HATCH OPENED AND CLOSED IN A FLASH. DISLAN JERKED AND ALMOST GOT STUCK IN THE NARROW OPENING.

WHEN THEY CAME TO, HAMMER'S MEN LOOKED AROUND, BUT THERE WAS NO SIGN OF HIM. NO MATTER HOW HARD THEY POUNDED ON THE LOCKED HATCH, THERE WAS NO RESULT. THEY TRIED TO CUT IT WITH A PLASMA TORCH. BUT IT TOOK QUITE A WHILE AND EVENTUALLY, DISLAN SLIPPED OUT.

HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO LEAVE THE SHIP. SOON THEY WOULD SENSE HIM AND FINISH HIM OFF FOR GOOD. THEY WERE JUST GOING TO EXECUTE HIM.

'FEAR NOT,' WAS UNDOUBTEDLY MIERU'S VOICE. THEN HE CAUGHT SIGHT OF A SMALL RECORDING DEVICE - THE SOUND WAS COMING FROM IT. THAT LITTLE 'BOX' HAD SAVED HIS LIFE.

DISLAN KNEW SOMETHING ELSE, THOUGH. ENNIO HAMMER WAS HIDING OTHER SECRETS. HE WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF SOMETHING ELSE INTERESTING TURNED UP ABOARD THIS SHIP. HE DOUBTED THAT THE SHIP'S FUNCTION WAS LIMITED TO SIMPLY MONITORING AND USING THE ANTI-RADAR ACCELERATOR.

DISLAN EVEN WONDERED HOW TWO PEOPLE WITH SUCH DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES COULD BECOME SPOUSES. IT SEEMED DOWNRIGHT UNBELIEVABLE TO HIM. SUDDENLY HE SLAPPED HIMSELF ON THE FOREHEAD. WHAT IF MIERU WAS JUST AN ANDROID. SHE WAS PROGRAMMED TO LOVE HIM. BUT STILL, INWARDLY, SHE HATED HIM TO DEATH.

SHE DECIDED TO TEST HER HYPOTHESIS. HE POKED BEHIND HER CROWN, AND BEFORE LONG, HE SPIED THE BARELY NOTICEABLE ELONIUM COVER OF HER SKULL, FITTED BENEATH SO-CALLED SYNTHETIC HAIR THAT HAD BEEN PROPERLY TREATED TO MIMIC THE REAL THING.

SHE TRIED TO EXAMINE THE INTEGRATED CIRCUITRY, WHICH WAS CONNECTED IN A VERY PARTICULAR WAY TO THE REST OF THE COMPONENTS INSIDE HER HEAD. IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT SOMEONE'S SKILLED FINGERS HAD BEEN TOUCHING, BUT THEY DIDN'T SEEM TO HAVE HAD TIME TO FINE TUNE ANYTHING AND HAD STOPPED THEIR WORK PREMATURELY.

'DAMN, GOOD ENGINEERS WE HAVE, IF THEY EVEN MANAGED TO SWEEP ME. JUST DON'T BLAME THEM.'

OUT OF RESPECT FOR HER HELP, HE DIDN'T DISASSEMBLE IT, BUT KEPT ITS INTEGRITY, AS HE FOUND IT MORE PLEASANT TO LOOK AT IN ITS COMPLETE FORM.

IT WOULD DEFINITELY SLOW HIM DOWN IF HE HAD TO CARRY HER, MUCH LIKE HIS DOOMED CLUB, BUT HE COULDN'T LEAVE HER EITHER. IF THEY FOUND HER, THEY COULD EASILY SMELL HIS OWN FOOTPRINTS.

IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT HE WAS LIKE A RED DEER AROUND WHICH THE WOLF PACK WAS NARROWING THE CIRCLE UNTIL THEY COULD CORNER HIM AND BREAK HIS BACK, WATCHING THE LIGHT SLOWLY FADE IN HIS PUPILS. QUITE A HEARTBREAKING SIGHT OF A MAN CAUGHT IN A COMPLETE STANDOFF! BUT DISLAN WASN'T GOING TO GIVE IN SO EASILY TO THIS BAND OF SCOUNDRELS!

THE GLOOMY ROOM HE FOUND HIMSELF IN, AS HE DIDN'T STOP WALKING EVEN WITH THE ANDROID ON HIS BACK, DIDN'T LOOK LIKE A HALL OR ANYTHING ELSE. IT WAS SOMETHING SUGGESTIVE OF SORROW.

DISLAN SHED A TEAR. AN ANDROID THAT HADN'T EVEN BEEN PROGRAMMED TO LOVE HIM, SINCE HE WASN'T ITS OWNER OR

MASTER, HAD GOTTEN TO KNOW HIM IN SUCH A SHORT TIME MORE THAN ALL OF HIS COWORKERS HE'D WORKED WITH FOR YEARS.

OF COURSE THE DANGER TO HIM STILL EXISTED. WALKING SLOWLY ALONG SOMETHING RESEMBLING THE AFOREMENTIONED EQUANATE 'CASINGS' THAT WERE THE SHIP'S MAIN ARTERIES, HE REACHED THE ENGINE ROOM.

'HELL BEGINS NOW!,' HE WHISPERED, AND MOVED INTO THE ENGINE ROOM.

HE CRAWLED AND CROUCHED, LEST SOME BUMP NEARBY TEAR HIS SUIT'S INSULATION. THEN HE SUDDENLY REALIZED. SAM HAD WALKED INTO A PLACE WITH NO WAY OUT.

FORTUNATELY, ENNIO'S MEN, FOR SOME REASON, DIDN'T GO TO CHECK THE ENGINE ROOM FIRST, BUT SCATTERED TO LOOK AROUND FOR NEARBY EXITS. THEY KNEW ALL TOO WELL THAT EVEN IF HE HAD BEEN INSIDE, DISLAN SIMPLY HAD NOWHERE TO GET OUT. LITTLE BY LITTLE THEY BEGAN TO RETURN.

DISLAN COULD FEEL THE TEMPERATURE RISE IN THE ENGINE ROOM, BUT HE COULDN'T GAG. THEY COULD JUST GET HIM OUT OF THERE AT ANY MOMENT.

SUDDENLY, MIERU'S VOICE WHISPERED TO HIM 'DON'T WORRY, THEY CAN'T GET TO YOU. JUST DON'T LEAVE THIS PLACE FOR A WHILE YET.'

THE GIAMOSAN-ENHANCED SPACESUITS THAT THE BATTLECORDON WORE ON THEIR BACKS PREVENTED THEM FROM SQUEEZING INTO THE NARROW SYNTH HATCH. THEY LOOKED LIKE A TEAM OF SHISH KEBABS WHO'D HAD A GOOD MEAL BUT DIDN'T WANT TO ADMIT IT.

THEY HADN'T TAKEN THE TORCH THEY'D USED TO MELT THE PREVIOUS HATCH. AND THEY DIDN'T REMEMBER WHERE THEY'D THROWN IT. DISLAN KNEW THIS GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE COULDN'T GO ON MUCH LONGER.

THEN SUDDENLY IT OCCURRED TO HIM TO USE SOMETHING HIGHLY UNCHARACTERISTIC. MIERU'S VOICE. THEY'D HARDLY EXPECTED TO HEAR THE VOICE OF A DEAD MAN. EVEN HAMMER WAS SUPERSTITIOUS ENOUGH TO BE STARTLED. AT LEAST FOR A MOMENT!

HE TRIED TO MAKE THE LITTLE BOX WORK, BUT IT HAD NO EFFECT. IT JUST REMAINED MUTE. IT WAS AS IF THE SPIRIT HAD EVAPORATED AND LEFT HIM TO SORT IT OUT AS HE KNEW HOW. THEN HE NOTICED THAT THERE WAS A TINY TRANSLATOR VALVE ON THE SIDE OF THE DEVICE AND HE DECIDED TO PRESS IT. HE SWITCHED ON HIS SUIT'S BUILT-IN MICROPHONE AND SHOUTED OUT IN HIS LOW BASS VOICE, 'ONGURO ZENAL.' THE TRANSLATOR MECHANISM HAD TRANSFORMED HIS VOICE BEYOND RECOGNITION, HOWEVER. IT WAS AS IF IT CAME FROM HELL. WAS THIS A QUIRK OF MIERU'S?

ABOVE, THE HEAVILY ARMORED SOLDIERS BEGAN TO LOOK AROUND UNEASILY. 'WHAT IF THERE'S A DEMON DOWN THERE?' THEY WHISPERED.

DISLAN PREFERRED TO THINK OF IT AS A DEMON. BUT HE KNEW THE HUMAN PSYCHE. IT WOULDN'T TAKE THEM LONG TO COME TO THEIR SENSES.

THOUGH SLIGHTLY ODD, HE HAD THE TIME HE NEEDED TO SQUEEZE INTO ONE OF THE ESCAPE PODS THAT WAS HIDDEN JUST OFF TO ONE SIDE IN THE ENGINE ROOM. BY THE TIME THEY CAME TO THEIR SENSES, HE ROLLED OVER AND QUICKLY PRESSURIZED THE SHUTTLE. HE HAD NO IDEA IF IT WAS PREPARED FOR FLIGHT. HE PRESSED THE EMERGENCY LAUNCH BUTTON. AND IT FLEW. OUT INTO THE VASTNESS.

- 'CALL THE COMMAND ROOM TO HAVE IT SHOT DOWN INSTANTLY,' ENNIO HAMMER GROWLED IN UTTER FRUSTRATION.

WHILE FLYING THE SHUTTLE, DISLAN NOTICED THAT IT HAD A SPECIAL CAMOUFLAGE MODE, IN WHICH NOT ONLY ITS SYSTEMS WENT INTO HIBERNATION CONDITIONS, BUT EVEN MORE IT BECAME

COMPLETELY INVISIBLE. THE TECHNOLOGY WAS EXTREMELY INTERESTING AS IT WAS BASED ON A SPECIAL 'META SKIN' CREATED FROM A LIQUID METAL NANO BASE. THIS SORT OF 'CLOAK' COVERED THE MACHINE. DISLAN ACTIVATED IT INSTANTLY. AND THE SHIP BECAME TRANSPARENT AS GLASS. BUT IT ALSO SEEMED TO BECOME TRANSPARENT ITSELF. IT WAS QUITE WHIPLASH. WELL, HE COULDN'T SEE HIS INSIDES LIKE ON AN X-RAY, BUT IT WAS JUST AS IF THERE WAS ONLY A VACUUM IN PLACE OF THE SHIP.

HE IMMEDIATELY DECIDED TO MAKE A HUNDRED AND EIGHTY DEGREE MANEUVER TO AVOID BEING SHOT DOWN BY THE FIREPOWER OF THE FLYING SPACE CITY, WHICH WAS HOVERING SOMEWHAT OMINOUSLY ON THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN STATIONARY NEAR ORBIT AND THE VAST EXPANSE OF SPACE. IT LOOKED LIKE A GHOSTLY ISLAND WHOSE FANGS LIKE PREDATORY CLAWS WANTED TO GRAB HIM. HE DIDN'T WANT TO JUST RELY ON HIS INVISIBILITY. THAT COULD HAVE PLAYED HIM A BAD JOKE.

THE RATHER CRAMPED COCKPIT HAD A SMALL AIRTIGHT COMPARTMENT IN WHICH HE HAD STOWED MIERU'S REMAINS. BUT THIS WAS NOT FETISHISM, IT WAS HIS FIRM INTENTION TO GIVE HER A DECENT BURIAL! SHE WAS THE ONLY TRUE FRIEND HE HAD EVER HAD! ANDROID OR NOT, THE CHIPS ON HER HEAD HELD SOME OF THE KEYS LEADING TO THE ANSWERS THE TECHNICIAN SOUGHT. BESIDES, THE CAMOUFLAGE THE FLYING APPARATUS PROVIDED HIM WAS NOT TO BE UNDERESTIMATED EITHER. HE HAD TO THINK ABOUT WHERE TO POSSIBLY LAND. BEHIND HIM, A GOOD DISTANCE FROM HIS FLIGHT PATH, WERE THE SLOPES OF SPECIAL QUANTUM CANNONS. ONLY THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THE COSMIC SECOND RING WERE AUTHORIZED TO POSSESS SUCH. HIS SPECIAL CAMOUFLAGE HAD MADE HIM INVISIBLE TO RADAR, BUT NOTHING COULD STOP THE QUANTUM BEAMS.

HE DECIDED TO MAKE A RUSHING LANDING. HE HOPED THE SHUTTLE'S HULL WOULDN'T CATCH FIRE OR EVEN DISINTEGRATE UPON ENTERING THE PLANET'S ATMOSPHERE.

OF COURSE, THERE WAS A DANGER THAT THIS WOULD MAKE HIS FLYING APPARATUS NOTICEABLE AND HE WOULD BE SHOT DOWN. BUT HE DECIDED TO RISK IT. BESIDES BEING AN EXCELLENT MECHANIC, HE WAS PROBABLY ZEGANDARIA'S BEST PILOT!

HE TURNED OFF THE AUTOPILOT AS WELL AS ALL OF THE MACHINE'S ENGINES - MAIN AND LATERAL STABILIZERS.

IT WAS TIME FOR ANDREW DISLAN TO SURVIVE HIS WAY!

HE ANGLED THE NOSE OF THE SHUTTLE AND UNDERTOOK A CONTROLLED FREE FALL, TRYING TO AVOID ANY HULL DEFORMATION THAT AN IMPROPER ANGLE OF DESCENT MIGHT CAUSE.

DISLAN DEFINITELY FELT THE TEMPERATURE RISE. OH YEAH, IT WAS STARTING TO GET DAMN HOT.

ELECTRIFIED CLOUDS FLASHED AMIDST THE ERUPTIONS OF PLASMA THAT WERE OCCURRING IN CERTAIN PARTS OF THE PLANET. THE SHUTTLE SOMEHOW MANAGED TO AVOID THEM. BUT AT ANY MOMENT THERE COULD HAVE BEEN A COLLISION, AND DUE TO THE EXTREMELY POOR VISIBILITY LANDING BECAME ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE.

DISLAN HAD SET THE RIGHT COORDINATES AND THE SHUTTLE HAD TO LAND NEAR THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT. PREDICTABLY, HE WANTED IT AWAY FROM THE REFINERY ON MAERX STREET. WHO WAS THE CULPRIT FOR ITS INCINERATION?

THE SHUTTLE DESCENDED RAPIDLY THROUGH THE THIN ATMOSPHERE DOWN TO THE ROCKY SEMI-DESERT SURFACE OF THE PLANET. SOON, VERY SOON, IT WOULD BE ON SOLID GROUND. THE CRAFT LANDED SMOOTHLY AMIDST A SMALL CLOUD OF DUST. DISLAN OPENED THE AIRLOCK AND STEPPED OUT. CAREFULLY, HE JUMPED TO THE GROUND. IMMEDIATELY HE LOOKED AROUND. THE FOGGY ATMOSPHERE ALL AROUND, MIXED WITH THE RUMBLE OF WAR, REVEALED AN ALMOST SURREAL, BUT FRIGHTENING PICTURE!

THE REFINERY FELL AMONG A GROUP OF OBJECTS OF STRATEGIC PURPOSE. IT WAS NO WONDER THAT SOMEONE HAD WANTED ITS

OBLITERATION. IN THE DISTANCE HE SPOTTED WOUNDED. SOME OF THE WORKERS HAD BEEN THROWN OUT BY THE LOUD EXPLOSION AND THEIR BODIES WERE TORN APART. WHEN ANDREW LOOKED AT THEM WITH AN EXPRESSIONLESS FACE, HIS DRUNKEN EXPRESSION MEANT ONLY THAT THEY SIMPLY HAD NO CHANCE OF SURVIVING. IT THREW HIM INTO TURMOIL BRIEFLY, BUT THEN HE TOLD HIMSELF THAT IT WAS OBVIOUSLY INEVITABLE. A LITTLE LESS HE BEGAN TO EXAMINE WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE REFINERY. THE TREATMENT PLANTS WERE HALF DESTROYED, BUT NOT ANY PART OF THE MAIN BUILDING. MORE THAN TWENTY THOUSAND WORKERS TOILED HERE EVERY DAY, AS IT WAS THE MONOPOLY FUEL PRODUCTION UNIT OF THE WESTERN PART OF THE PLANET.

THE TECHNICIAN WAS IN A WELL-INSULATED SPACESUIT. HE HAD SLIPPED THE REMAINS OF THE MIERU INTO A SMALL AIRTIGHT CAPSULE. THERE WERE CLEARLY NO OTHER SIGNS OF LIFE AROUND. HE WAS JUST ABOUT TO TAKE ONE LAST LOOK WHEN HIS EYES FELL ON A DEAD WOMAN. THERE WAS NO DOUBT IN HIS MIND THAT SHE HAD GASPED IN HELLISH AGONY. IT WAS PLAIN TO SEE ON HER HAGGARD FACE THAT THE SHIFTS AT THE REFINERY HAD COMPLETELY RUINED HER. BUT IT WAS ONE OF THE VERY FEW SECURE JOBS. BESIDE HER, HER BABY GIRL WAS STILL BREATHING. SHE HAD SURVIVED AGAINST ALL ODDS. DISLAN RUSHED TO TRY TO DO WHAT SHE COULD FOR HIM. THE WOMAN HAD CHANGED HER COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLE AND GIVEN IT TO HER DAUGHTER IN AN ATTEMPT TO SAVE HER. SHE HAD SACRIFICED HERSELF SO SHE COULD LIVE. THE LITTLE GIRL MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN FULLY AWARE OF IT ALL. BUT THERE WERE DRIED TEARS ON HIS LITTLE FACE, CLEARLY VISIBLE THROUGH THE GLASS OF THE SPACESUIT. APPARENTLY THE MOTHER HAD PICKED HIM UP FROM SOMEWHERE UNKNOWN. THE STRANGE THING WAS THAT HE HADN'T UN-AIRTIGHTENED HIMSELF AFTER ALL.

DISLAN TOOK THE CHILD IN. SHE LOOKED INTO HIS DEEP BLUE EYES AND ASKED:

- WHAT'S YOUR NAME?

- 'MIERU,' CAME HIS CHILDISH VOICE.

THEN DISLAN UNDERSTOOD THE WHOLE CONFUSED STORY. MIERU WAS JUST THE MOTHER OF THE CHILD WHO BORE HER OWN NAME. IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT IT WAS ILLEGITIMATE, OR SHE WOULDN'T HAVE GIVEN IT TO THIS SIMPLE AND DESTITUTE WOMAN TO RAISE. A WOMAN, HOWEVER, WHO HAD COME TO LOVE HIM AS HER OWN, DESPITE BARELY SUPPORTING HIM WITH HER MEAGER RESOURCES. BUT HOW COULD AN ANDROID BE A MOTHER? AND MAYBE THAT WAS EXACTLY WHAT HAMMER WANTED? THE PERFECT OBEDIENT CREATURE TO PROVIDE THE PERFECT VENEER OF NORMALCY THAT WOULD ENSURE HE STAYED IN POST ON THE FLYING SPACE CITY. BUT DISLAN ALLOWED FOR ANOTHER MUCH MORE LIKELY POSSIBILITY. IT ASSUMED THE REPLACEMENT OF ABSOLUTELY EVERY BODY PART AND REPLACING IT WITH A BIOMECHANICAL ONE SINCE THE BLACK MARKET FOR ORGANS WAS WELL DEVELOPED. AS WAS EVERY OTHER PLANET IN THE GALAXY, BY THE WAY. SO, BY THAT LOGIC, SHE HAD BEEN GIVING HER ORGANS AWAY ONE BY ONE JUST TO PROVIDE THE MEANS TO RAISE HER DAUGHTER AND KEEP HER AWAY FROM THE REAL DANGER. IN THE END SHE HAD EVEN AGREED TO HAVE HER MIND TRANSPLANTED ONTO SOME SIMPLE INTEGRATED CIRCUIT.

BEHIND HER, THE TECHNICIAN HEARD A NOISE. APPARENTLY, MAYBE IT WAS SOLDIERS OR MARAUDERS. SHE DECIDED NOT TO TAKE ANY CHANCES. HE GRABBED THE CHILD UNDER THE ARM. IT LOOKED AT HIM IN SURPRISE, BUT SAID NOTHING. AND THEY WALKED TOWARDS THE CRYPT. AS A TECHNICIAN OF THE HIGHEST RANK, DISLAN KNEW THE SECRETS OF THIS PLANET ON HIS FIVE FINGERS. MAYBE THAT WAS WHY HE WAS SUCH A BRUTE!

THE CRYPT WAS A SPECIAL UNDERGROUND COMPLEX WHOSE ACCESS WAYS LED TO UNKNOWN PLACES. IN ORDER TO PREVENT THE SPEEDER FROM BEING STOLEN, DISLAN HAD ACTIVATED THE CAMOUFLAGE MODE AND IT WAS NOW COMPLETELY TRANSPARENT. DISLAN HAD KEPT HIS NARENZIUM IDENTIFICATION CHIP IN ORDER TO LEGITIMIZE HIMSELF IF HE WAS ASKED FOR IT. IN CASE THEY MET ANYONE AT ALL. THE GIRL OBEDIENTLY FOLLOWED AFTER HIM.



SOMEWHERE FAR BEHIND THEM THE RUMBLE OF BATTLE COULD BE HEARD.

THE CRYPT WAS BUILT WITHOUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF THE WORKERS ON MAERX STREET AND WAS LOCATED NOT THAT FAR FROM THE REFINERY AT A DISTANCE OF ABOUT FIVE MILES. BUT THE PERIMETER WAS CORDONED OFF.

DISLAN WAS EXTREMELY LUCKY THAT, DUE TO THE OUTBREAK OF ALL-OUT WAR, THE POSTS WERE NOT IN PLACE OR HE WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ABLE TO PENETRATE THE REFINERY.

AT FIRST, DISLAN COULDN'T UNDERSTAND THE CHANGE IN HIMSELF AT ALL. HE HAD NEVER HAD CLOSE CONTACT WITH ANOTHER HUMAN BEING. BUT NOW HE WAS GIVING EVERYTHING TO SAVE THE GIRL. PERHAPS THAT WAS HOW HE WANTED TO CLEAR HIS CONSCIENCE. THE GLOOMY SURROUNDINGS OF THE CRYPT WERE NOT THE BEST PLACE FOR A MAN TO BE. THE TECHNICIAN WAS WELL ACQUAINTED WITH THE INNER INTRICATE TANGLE OF CORRIDORS AND TUNNELS THAT LED FAR TO THE NORTHEAST - PERHAPS STRETCHING HUNDREDS OR EVEN THOUSANDS OF MILES. DISLAN HAD OF COURSE NEVER WALKED THROUGH ALL OF THEM. HE ONLY HAD MAPS AND A FLAIR FOR HOW TO READ THEM. WHEN THEY WERE DOING THE FIRST TRIALS, SOME OF THE HALLS WERE EXCELLENT PLACES TO CONDUCT THE EXPERIMENTS.

MIERU HAD NEVER ENTERED A ROOM LIKE THIS, BUT SOMEHOW SHE TRUSTED HER NEW PROTECTOR.

THEY KEPT GOING FURTHER AND FURTHER INSIDE. DISLAN SWITCHED ON A SMALL FLASHLIGHT THAT WAS TOO OFTEN USED FOR EVERYDAY NEEDS. THE TECHNICIAN WAS UNARMED, AND IF ANYONE IN THE DARK WAS INTENT ON ATTACKING THEM, IT WAS UNLIKELY HE WOULD BE ABLE TO DEFEND HIMSELF MUCH.

BUT HE WASN'T INTIMIDATED. TO BE HONEST, AND TO BE SCARED THE MARAUDERS OUTSIDE WERE HARDLY THE BETTER ALTERNATIVE. HE KNEW THAT SOMEWHERE IN THE DEPTHS LURKED THE SOR IN

TUM CATHEDRAL. HE WANTED TO TAKE THE LITTLE GIRL TO WHERE HIS GRANDMOTHER HAD DIED, NOT SHOW HER SOME RAGGEDY ANDROID HE CLAIMED WAS ACTUALLY HER MOTHER.

THERE WOULD BE MANY SINS WEIGHING ON DISLAN'S CONSCIENCE. THE TUNNELS RAN DEEP AND MADE SUCH IMPROBABLE RAMIFICATIONS THAT IT WAS INEVITABLE HE WOULD HAVE TO CONSULT THE MAP FROM TIME TO TIME. OTHERWISE HE MIGHT NEVER HAVE GOT OUT OF THIS MAZE AT ALL.

MIERU DIDN'T CRY OR SCREAM, ONLY HER LARGE EYES WIDENED IN SOME SORT OF WONDER AT THE BIZARRE SURROUNDINGS. IT WASN'T HUMID DOWN HERE, IT WAS DRY, AND THE SOUNDS FROM OUTSIDE DIDN'T REACH THAT DEPTH.

DISLAN SUDDENLY WONDERED WHY THIS CATHEDRAL HAD BEEN ERECTED HERE AND WASN'T EVEN ON THE MAP. HONESTLY, IF IT WASN'T FOR THE WORDS OF MIERU'S MOTHER, HE WOULD HAVE NEVER SUSPECTED ABOUT THIS OBJECT.

THE SOR IN TUM CATHEDRAL WAS BUILT BY AN ORDER OF VENETARIAN ROGUES AND PSEUDO-DWARVES WHO BELIEVED IN A FICTIONAL GOD, TORNUS. THERE WAS NO MORE FOOLISH REASONING PUT INTO THE MINDS OF THE ORDINARY BELIEVERS THAN THAT OF THEIR INNER DEVOTION TO A FALSE DEITY. IT WASN'T EVEN EXACTLY A CULT.

DISLAN PULLED OUT A SMALL BLASTER THAT HE HAD CASUALLY SHRUGGED OFF ONE OF HIS PURSUERS. MORE ACCURATELY, THE WEAPON HAD SOMEHOW ENDED UP IN THE ENGINE ROOM WHERE HE ACTUALLY WAS. THOUGH SMALL, THE WEAPON WAS DANGEROUS.

BEFORE LONG, THEY WERE IN FRONT OF THE CATHEDRAL IN QUESTION. THE BUILDING WAS INDEED MAJESTIC, A RARE GOTHIC ARCHITECTURE WITH ENORMOUS NEOBAROQUE-STYLE SUPPORTING COLUMNS. THIS RARE WORK OF ART COULD ONLY EVOKE ADMIRATION. IT WAS THE TRUTH ITSELF. THEY HAD LINGERED TOO LONG PAST THE CATHEDRAL ITSELF, WHICH EXUDED A SPECIAL AURA.

DISLAN COULD TELL SOMETHING WAS BECKONING THEM TO GO INSIDE.

HOWEVER, WHEN THEY STEPPED INSIDE THE CATHEDRAL SOME INVISIBLE HAND SEEMED TO PREVENT THEM FROM DOING SO.

WHY SUCH PSEUDO-RELIGIOUS CULTS FOUND SUCH FERTILE GROUND NO ONE COULD SAY.

ONE THING WAS FOR SURE THE LITTLE GIRL DID NOT FEEL COMFORTABLE IN A PLACE LIKE THIS. EVERYTHING AROUND WAS MALEVOLENT.

DISLAN TRIED TO CONTINUE DOWN SOME OF THE SIDE CORRIDORS, BUT FAILED. THE SAME INVISIBLE HAND SEEMED TO BE HOLDING HIM BACK.

THEN NEAR THE CATHEDRAL HE SAW WHAT LOOKED LIKE A SMALL SARCOPHAGUS. INSIDE LAY THE BODY OF THE REAL MIERU. THE VILE ENNIO HAMMER HAD TURNED THIS ANDROID DOLL INTO HER LIKENESS. HER TORSO WAS COMPLETELY MUTILATED AND DECAYED, BUT HER FACE WAS STILL BEAUTIFUL AS IF SOME INVISIBLE FORCE WAS KEEPING IT FROM LOSING ITS CHARM.

DISLAN UNDERSTOOD. THERE WAS NO WAY ON - SHE HAD TO GO BACK. HE HEADED BACK.

WHEN THEY EMERGED FROM THE CRYPT THE NEXT MORNING, THEY SAW THAT MANY OF THE WORKERS' CORPSES WERE MISSING. SURELY ENNIO HAMMER HAD FOLLOWED ON THEIR HEELS!

## CHAPTER SIX: ENNIO HAMMER

HAMMER WAS NOT A MAN WHO FORGAVE OR DISREGARDED MEANNESS. DISLAN HAD ABUSED HIS TRUST AND HE WAS GOING TO PAY - AND PAY DEARLY. HOW HE HAD DESTROYED COMBAT

SPEEDERS WHO COULD HAVE TIPPED THE SCALES IN THEIR FAVOR! IT WAS ONLY WITH MIERU'S KNOWLEDGE - OR RATHER, THE ANDROID THAT HAD COPIED HER IDENTITY.

DISLAN HAD SAVED HIMSELF INITIALLY, BUT THIS TIME HIS PUNISHMENT WOULD BE SEVERE. ENNIO READIED ALL AVAILABLE STRENGTH TO STOP HIM. HE HAD CONTACTED SURVIVING MERCENARIES AND SENT A PLATOON OF TRAINED ASSASSINS ON THE COCKY FOOL'S HEELS TO FINISH HIM OFF WITHOUT A DROP OF MERCY.

HAMMER HAD DELIBERATELY AVOIDED HIS CONTACTS WITH THEM AND HAD INSTRUCTED THEIR COMMANDER TO CARRY OUT HIS ORDERS. THEY WERE TO BRING HIM ANDREW'S HEAD!

DISLAN CAUGHT SIGHT OF THEM SNIFFING NOT FAR FROM THE CRYPT. THEY HADN'T FOUND THE SHUTTLE OR THEY WOULDN'T HAVE ACTED SO OPENLY. THEY WERE COMING IN GROUPS. THEY APPEARED TO BE PROFESSIONALS, BUT THEY DIDN'T KNOW WHO HE REALLY WAS.

AS A TECHNICIAN OF THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE RANK, HE HAD UNDERGONE THE TRAINING FOR AN ELITE SOLDIER IN AN ABBREVIATED FORM - THIS INCLUDED BASIC ARMY TRAINING AND NOT LEAST SPECIALIZED TRAINING IN WEAPONS HANDLING. HE COULD EASILY HAVE PURSUED A MILITARY CAREER, AS LONG AS HE HAD ASKED FOR IT OF COURSE.

DISLAN HAD READ SOMEWHERE THAT THE TRAJECTORY OF A PLASMA BULLET COULD PIERCE THE HEADS OF SEVERAL PEOPLE SIMULTANEOUSLY IF A SO-CALLED TORQUE AMPLIFIER WAS USED. DISLAN DIDN'T HAVE THAT GADGET OR HE WOULD HAVE BLOWN THEIR HEADS OFF LIKE A PUNCH.

THE GIRL HAD COVERED THE VISOR OF HER SUIT HELMET WITH HER HANDS. DISLAN HAD CHECKED TO MAKE SURE HER OXYGEN BOTTLES WERE IN WORKING ORDER, SINCE HE WOULDN'T HAVE TIME TO DEAL WITH HER LATER.

SHE DECIDED TO OPERATE COVERTLY AND PLAY IT SAFE. THE WIND WOULD BE HIS ALLY AS HE WAS AWARE OF WHAT HE WAS DOING. AND MASTERFUL EVASION WOULD HAVE THEM MOVING MORE TIGHTLY BEFORE HE PRESSED THE TRIGGER ON THE WEAPON. GET READY AND FIRE.

THE FIRST ONE DIDN'T EVEN REALIZE EXACTLY WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HIM. TO SOME EXTENT, NEITHER DID THE SECOND. BUT THE OTHERS SENSED AND BEGAN TO SHELL THE PLACE WHERE ANDREW WAS HIDING. THEY WERE DETERMINED TO BURY HIM WITHOUT AN OUNCE OF MERCY. THAT WAS THE ORDER.

THE TECHNICIAN TRIED TO PROVIDE A SAFE HAVEN FOR THE GIRL. HE NEEDED TO BE IN A MORE SHELTERED SPOT BECAUSE SOME RANDOM SLOPE COULD EASILY KILL HIM. DISLAN WAS AT LEAST PROTECTED BY A COMBAT SUIT, WHICH WAS A COMPARATIVELY SMALL CONSOLATION, BUT THE GIRL WORE A MOST ORDINARY ONE AND HAD TO BE CAREFUL.

- 'DISLAN, WE KNOW YOU'RE OUT THERE,' SOMEONE BELLOWED. 'DON'T HANG AROUND AND HIDE FROM US. OTHERWISE IT WILL GET WORSE FOR YOU.'

HOWEVER, DISLAN DECIDED TO PLAY THEM OFF SO HE COULD KILL THE OTHERS. HE HAD TO DEAL WITH EVERYONE AND NOT MISS - NOT ONCE.

THE REFINERY RUINS WERE PRETTY GOOD FOR A GAME LIKE THIS, BUT HERE, A FEW MILES AWAY, THE TERRAIN WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY OPEN.

DISLAN THOUGHT OF THE ANDROID. MIERU WAS GOING TO PLAY HIS ROLE AS HIS PROTECTOR ONE LAST TIME. THIS TIME HE WOULD USE HER AS BAIT.

HE HAD TO SHOW WHAT HE WAS CAPABLE OF OR HIS DOOM WAS INEVITABLE. THE SOLDIERS, HOWEVER, DID NOT DESCEND TO PURSUE HIM AS HE EXPECTED, BUT SIMPLY THINNED THEIR

FORMATION AND TRIED TO SURROUND HIM AND NARROW THE CIRCLE AROUND HIM.

THE TECHNICIAN UNDERSTOOD. THEN HE ROARED LIKE A WOUNDED ANIMAL AND TOOK OFF FOR THE NEAREST COVER. THE SOLDIERS OPENED FIRE ON HIM AGAIN. THE BATTLE WAS TOO UNEQUAL. BUT EVEN SO THERE WAS STILL SOME PROSPECT OF HIS SUCCESS.

THE TECHNICIAN DECIDED TO MAKE THEM SPIN IN A CIRCLE AS HE EXPERTLY STEPPED OVER THE CORPSES OF THE TWO HE HAD ALREADY KILLED. HE'D NOTICED THAT THEY HAD ESONIUM BOMBS. HE JUST HAD TO GET TO ONE OF THEM.

HOWEVER, THEY HAD FIGURED OUT HIS INTENT AGAIN. THAT WAS WHEN DISLAN DECIDED TO SHOOT THE BOMB STRAIGHT - WHATEVER HAPPENED. THE SHOCKWAVE DIDN'T TAKE LONG TO SWEEP AWAY TWO OF THE OTHER CLOSEST ONES, AND MANAGED TO WOUND THREE OF HIS ENEMIES.

THEN HE TOOK OUT THE ANDROID. HIS REMAINS STILL Languished IN THE SPECIAL BAG HE HAD STOWED THEM IN. AT THE SIGHT OF MIERU - WHO WAS KNOWN AS HAMMER'S WIFE - THEY WERE A LITTLE CONFUSED. DISLAN SHOT THE LAST FEW AS WELL. IT WAS SIMPLY PHENOMENAL!

HE THEN STOWED THEIR WEAPONS AND PICKED UP THE GIRL, WHO HAD TO BE TAKEN TO SAFETY. HE WAS WOUNDED HIMSELF, TOO - BUT NOT FROM THE BULLETS, BUT FROM THE NEAR DETONATION OF THE TEN MICROTONS OF ESONIUM EQUIVALENT HE HAD ACTIVATED HIMSELF.

HAMMER HAD ANTICIPATED THEIR COMMANDER STAYING FURTHER AWAY. HE FAILED TO GET WITHIN SIGHT OF DISLAN.

THE COMMANDER STEPPED BACK TO REPORT.

- 'SHOOT HIM,' HAMMER ORDERED. 'I DON'T CARE, BUT I WANT HIM REMOVED. OTHERWISE YOU'LL BE REMOVED.'

- 'I'LL BE FINE,' HE MUTTERED TORTUREDLY.

DISLAN, HOWEVER, WAS GONE. THERE WAS NO CHANCE OF FINDING HIM.

HAMMER HAD WITNESSED HIS SPECTACULAR FAILURE. THIS TIME HE KNEW ONE THING - HIS DEATH WAS INEVITABLE - NOT FOR ANYTHING ELSE, BUT BECAUSE THEY WOULD EASILY FIND OUT WHO WAS TO BLAME. IT WAS HAMMER. HE'D DROPPED THAT DISLAN SNAKE IN HIS BOSOM. HE'D LET MIERU USE HIM TO GET REVENGE. WHAT A BLIND MAN HE WAS! HAMMER SMACKED HIS SUIT'S HEAVILY ARMORED GAUNTLET AGAINST HIS HEAD, BUT BECAUSE OF THE LACK OF GRAVITY, HE FELT NOTHING.

HIS GRIEF WAS INDESCRIBABLE. HE HAD QUESTIONED ALL HIS SUBORDINATES ABOUT THE WHOLE BLASPHEMOUS INTERFERENCE WITH THE WEAPON SETTINGS. NO ONE HAD SEEN ANYTHING. AND NO ONE DARED TO GROYAN.

HAMMER KNEW DISLAN WAS TOO SMART AND ONCE HE SLIPPED AWAY, IT WOULDN'T BE EASY TO CATCH HIM. HE'D MANAGED TO LOCATE HIS APPROXIMATE DROP POINT, BUT HE'D MISSED IT AGAIN. HE WOULDN'T CATCH IT A THIRD TIME. AND HE WAS LEFT TO AWAIT HARSH RETRIBUTION AT THE HAND OF HIS OPPONENT! AND IT CERTAINLY WOULD NOT BE LATE, BUT WOULD COME MOST UNEXPECTEDLY.

STAYING ON THE COSMIC SECOND RING WAS RATHER POINTLESS MAINLY DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE WEAPON WAS ALREADY USELESS. YES, THE SYSTEMS WERE FUNCTIONAL, BUT IN PRACTICE IT WASN'T GOING TO SAVE THEM FROM CERTAIN STARVATION, AS THEY HAD NOTHING TO EAT ANYMORE AND ALL THE SUPPLIES OF ELENDORANS AND HYRAS WERE DEPLETED.

HAMMER DECIDED TO AT LEAST USE THE LAST REMNANTS OF HIS POWER TO SURVIVE. ON THE PRETEXT OF USING THE CORRECTION TO WITHDRAW FROM A MILITARY SITE, HE GATHERED THE REMAINS

OF THE CREW AND FORCED HIMSELF INTO THOSE ESCAPE PODS THAT HAD REMAINED INTACT SO FAR.

HE INTENDED TO FLY OFF IN AN UNKNOWN DIRECTION AT LEAST UNTIL EVENTS SETTLED DOWN. BUT HE WOULD RETURN SOONER OR LATER INTO AVENGE HIS MORTAL ENEMY. AN ENEMY THAT HAD DESTROYED HIS ENTIRE WORLD. BUILT SO THOROUGHLY. SO PERFECTLY ARRANGED ACCORDING TO HAMMER'S IDEAS.

DISLAN AND THE GIRL DECIDED TO HEAD FOR THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT. ONLY THIS PLACE COULD BE CALLED SAFE. AT LEAST FOR NOW! DISLAN KNEW THAT NO ONE WOULD HIT HIM. FIRSTLY, IT TOOK A LOT OF PUNCHING POWER AND SECONDLY MANY OF THE CHIEFS COULDN'T LEAVE ZEGANDARIA ANY OTHER WAY.

ENTERING SUCH A FACILITY WAS INDEED FORBIDDEN. BUT DISLAN DIDN'T PARTICULARLY CARE. HE WAS BORN TO BREAK LAWS AND RULES. IT WAS HIS TRUE CALLING, AND IT GAVE HIM PLEASURE.

THE TWO CREPT STEALTHILY TOWARDS DISLAN'S FORMER WORK 'PLACE'. A PLACE THAT WAS ABOUT TO BECOME HIS GRAVE, BUT COULD NOW BE HIS ONLY SAFE HAVEN.

THE SPACEPORT LOOKED LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM THE LAST TIME HE HAD RESIDED HERE. A STRANGE PLACE. FOR STRANGE PEOPLE. DISLAN AND MIERU. TWO CONDEMNED SOULS THAT NO ONE WANTED.

THE TWO JUST STOOD THERE, NOT MOVING, WAITING FOR THE WORST. BUT IT DIDN'T FOLLOW. THEY RAN TO THE INSTALLATIONS OF ONE OF THE INNER SECTORS.

THE SPACEPORT WAS HUGE. THE SIZE OF THIS FACILITY NOW SEEMED TO DISLAN EVEN LARGER THAN BEFORE. SOMEWHERE IN THERE, THE DIM LIGHT OF A CHEAP IRENIC LAMP - THE KIND THEY USUALLY PUT NEAR SOME OF THE SECONDARY SHUTTLE LAUNCH BAYS - WAS DIMLY FILTERING THROUGH. THEY DECIDED TO HEAD THAT WAY.



THEY DIDN'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO LOOK AROUND TO SEE IF ANY THREAT WAS LURKING. THE WHOLE COMPLEX WAS VERY WELL PROTECTED BY UNDERGROUND INSTALLATIONS WHERE PROTON BOMBS WERE PLACED. THE SPACEPORT NATURALLY ALSO HAD AN ENERGY SHIELD AGAINST POSSIBLE ATTACKS.

DISLAN WONDERED IF THERE WERE AT LEAST ANY PEOPLE LEFT ALIVE HERE FROM HIS LAST TIME ON THE PLANET. HE DEFINITELY DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO LOOK AROUND EVERY CORNER, AND MAYBE HE SHOULD HAVE.

A LOUD EXPLOSION ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE SPACEPORT CAUGHT THEIR ATTENTION.

- 'THEY'VE STARTED THE ATTACK,' DISLAN MUTTERED. 'IT WOULD ALL BE OVER SOON. OR SO I HOPE.'

THE ADVANCING SWARMS OF COMBAT DRONES AND OTHER EQUIPMENT MADE IT ALL SEEM SIMPLY UNREAL.

THE TWO COULD SEE THAT A FEW HUNDRED YARDS AWAY, EVERYTHING WAS JUST A NEVER-ENDING FIERY INFERNO. SOME OF THE CITY'S PROTECTIVE RINGS HAD BEEN KNOCKED DOWN. THIS WAS NOW ALL TOO CLEARLY VISIBLE. THERE WAS NO WAY THEY WERE GOING TO BE ABLE TO WIN.

DISLAN TOOK THE GIRL IN HIS ARMS, AS MUCH AS IT WAS POSSIBLE TO DO SO GIVEN THE FACT THAT SHE WAS WEARING A SPACESUIT. THE GIRL LOOKED AT HIM AND COOED:

- YOU KNOW MOMMY TOLD ME YOU WERE COMING. THAT'S WHY I HELPED YOU GET OUT OF THERE.

DISLAN WAS QUITE AWARE THAT HE HADN'T GOTTEN HIS FREEDOM FOR NOTHING. AND HE WAS READY TO RETURN THE FAVOR THAT MIERU HAD VALUED AT THE COST OF HIS OWN LIFE.

- 'YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE KILLED HAMMER'S MEN,' THE CHILD PRONOUNCED SOMEWHAT SNIDELY. 'THEY WOULDN'T TOUCH YOU WHILE YOU WERE PAST ME.'

DISLAN HADN'T REALLY EXPECTED TO HEAR SUCH A THING FROM A CHILD. BUT HE KNEW THAT HIS SURVIVAL DEPENDED ON CARRYING OUT HIS MOTHER'S DYING WISH, AND WITHOUT HER EXPLICITLY ASKING HIM TO DO SO - SOMETHING VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE GIVEN THAT SHE WAS LONG DEAD.

- 'WHO ARE YOU, ANYWAY?,' ASKED DISLAN, WHO WAS BECOMING WELL AWARE OF WHAT HE HAD GOTTEN HIMSELF INTO.

- I AM ACTUALLY THE GOD THORNUS, OR RATHER I WAS POSING AS THIS FICTIONAL FALSE GOD. YOU HUMANS CERTAINLY LIKE TO BELIEVE IN FICTIONAL GODS AND IDOLS. YOU RESORT TO THEM IN YOUR PRAYERS IN TIMES OF WEAKNESS. LET ME TELL YOU SOMETHING. INSTEAD OF LOOKING OUTSIDE FOR HELP, YOU SHOULD SIMPLY LOOK WITHIN FOR THE ANSWER. THERE YOU WILL SURELY FIND IT. YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOUR OWN DESTINY.

- 'AND HOW YOU FOOLED SO MANY PEOPLE!,' DISLAN WAS ASTONISHED.

- IT WASN'T THAT HARD. THE MYERANIAN RACE ACTUALLY HAD TO SURVIVE. THE VENETARIANS WERE JUST OUR NATURAL ENEMIES.

- 'BUT YOU'RE LIKE US - HUMANS!,' GASPED DISLAN AGAIN.

- 'ONLY EXTERNALLY, BECAUSE WE CAN CHANGE OUR APPEARANCE,' THE GIRL CALMLY REPLIED. 'HOWEVER, THERE ARE VERY FEW PLACES LEFT WHERE WE CAN ACTUALLY SURVIVE. THIS PLANET IS EXTREMELY HOSTILE TO US. WE ARE JUST TRYING TO CONTINUE OUR EXISTENCE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE.'

- 'OKAY, LET'S ASSUME I SAVED YOU,' DISLAN BEGAN RATHER CAUTIOUSLY, 'NOT SO MUCH TO SHOW OFF WHAT HE DID AS TO REASSURE HIMSELF, 'WHAT AM I TO YOU?'

- I NEED YOU FOR COVER, AT LEAST FOR A WHILE. UNTIL MY RACE LEAVES THESE PARTS OR MOVES TO LIVE SOMEWHERE SAFER.

- 'SO YOU INHABIT THE INSIDE OF THE CATHEDRAL?,' HE ASKED HER.

- NOT EXACTLY. THE CATHEDRAL ITSELF IS MADE UP OF THE BONES OF FALLEN MYRANIANS, AND PERHAPS THAT IS WHY IT IS SO BEAUTIFUL.

DISLAN BIT HIS LIP ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY. HE HAD FALLEN INTO A DEATH TRAP.

THE GIRL DIDN'T SEEM UPSET, THOUGH. SHE JUST WANTED TO TELL HIM A LITTLE MORE ABOUT HER OWN RACE THAT SHE WISHED TO SAVE.

THE TECHNICIAN HAD TAKEN IT UPON HIMSELF TO TAKE CARE OF HER UNTIL THE END, AND HE WAS TRUE TO HIS WORD. HE WANTED TO GET BACK AT HER. THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT HER, SOMETHING HE MISSED SO MUCH IN MANY OTHER PEOPLE HE WAS OBLIGED TO INTERACT WITH. THERE WAS NO STOPPING HIM FROM HELPING HER AND PAYING HER BACK.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DIOMED BASE

SASIA LESHOND WAS A BEAUTIFUL BLONDE GIRL WHO DEFINITELY DIDN'T SUFFER FROM A LACK OF ADMIRERS. A STRAIGHT A STUDENT IN HER CLASS, SHE STOOD OUT AMONG HER CLASSMATES FROM A VERY YOUNG AGE. HER PARENTS WERE SO VERY PROUD OF HER. OTHERS BELIEVED THAT WHATEVER SHE TOOK UP, SHE COULD HANDLE. SHE WAS PASSIONATE ABOUT EVERYTHING BUT WAS ALWAYS WILLING TO HELP HER FRIENDS. ONE COULD REALLY WONDER HOW SHE FOUND THE TIME. IT WAS HARD TO PINPOINT WHAT HAD MADE HER ENLIST IN THE ROYAL UBUNDER FIGHTING FORCE. A PROFESSION THAT MANY ATTRIBUTED MORE TO MEN THAN

CREATURES OF THE FAIRER SEX, BUT ONE THAT HAD CAPTURED HER COMPLETELY. SASIA WAS A FIGHTER PILOT OF THE DESTROYER CLASS.

HER FRIENDSHIP WITH MARK DATED BACK TO TRAINING AT THE ACADEMY, BUT THEY HAD ACTUALLY KNOWN EACH OTHER FOR MUCH LONGER. THEY HAD PLAYED ON THE GREEN MEADOWS OF ENSARIANAN AS CHILDREN. ALTHOUGH THE PLANET WAS ALMOST COMPLETELY DESERTED, THE GREENERY THRIVED THANKS TO THE SPECIAL ENDOSIAN COVER THAT THE ENTIRE CAPITAL WAS UNDER, WHICH MAINTAINED NOT ONLY THE OXYGEN LEVEL BUT ALSO THE ARTIFICIAL CLIMATE OF THIS OASIS.

IN FACT, SHE HAD MET MARK AT A BOOK FAIR, WHERE HE HAPPENED TO BE WITH HIS PARENTS, LOOKING FOR THE LATEST E-BOOK ON VINTAGE SPEEDER MODELS. IN TRUTH, THE ENCOUNTER WAS NOT SIGNIFICANT FOR ANYTHING, BUT THE FACT THAT IT TOOK PLACE AT ALL HAD NO SMALL IMPACT ON FUTURE EVENTS.

FROM THEN ON, SASIA COULDN'T TEAR HERSELF AWAY FROM HIM AND THE TWO BECAME INSEPARABLE FRIENDS. THEY ORGANISED CHASES THROUGH THE NARROW GOTHIC STREETS OF ENSARIANAN. AND THEY WERE DEFINITELY GETTING ON THE NERVES OF THE LOCALS. BUT IT WAS ALL STUCK BACK IN CHILDHOOD. SHE STILL KEPT BEAUTIFUL MEMORIES OF THAT TIME. MEMORIES THAT MADE HER FEEL TRULY ALIVE.

'LIFE SLIPS THROUGH OUR FINGERS LIKE SAND IN AN HOURGLASS, BUT AT LEAST WE CAN LIVE FOR THE MOMENT,' SHE LIKED TO REPEAT A CLICHÉ SHE HAD HEARD FROM WHO KNEW WHERE. NOT THAT ANYONE IN THE ADVANCED FUTURE WOULD EVER HAVE THOUGHT TO CHECK THIS OUT IN PRACTICE, AS NO ONE HAD SEEN OR HEARD OF THIS RATHER INTERESTING MEANS OF MEASURING TIME.

WITH THE GRACE OF A PANTHER, SASIA DESCENDED THE ANTI-GRAVITY LADDER FROM THE SPEEDER'S COCKPIT AND LANDED SAFELY WITH THE CONFIDENCE OF A CAT THAT NEVER FALLS ON ITS BACK. SHE HAD JUST RETURNED FROM A MISSION AND WAS HOPING

TO REPORT IMPORTANT CLASSIFIED INFORMATION TO HER SUPERIORS. THE INFORMATION, SHE BELIEVED, CAME FROM A TRUSTED SOURCE AND STATED AN APPARENT BETRAYAL OF THE BASE. SHE HADN'T COUNTED ON ANYONE BELIEVING HER, AS ALL MEMBERS OF THE HIGH COMMAND HAD BEEN LOOKING AT HER WARILY SINCE HER SPEEDER HAD LANDED AT THE BASE.

THERE WERE OTHER SHUTTLES AROUND, SOME OF WHICH WERE ALREADY EMPTY, AS THEIR OWNERS HAD GONE TO THE NEARBY MARCHING PUB, UNCLE ZENGAR'S, WHICH OFFERED THE ARMY PEOPLE'S FAVOURITE SHAKE, BEARING THE EXOTIC NAME OF 'SUNSET OF THE GUAROONS'. ACTUALLY, THIS RATHER POETIC AND IN A WAY EVEN ROMANTIC NAME WAS JUST A CLEVER TRICK DEvised BY THE OWNER OF THE RESTAURANT, ZENGAR ONE-EYED, TO ATTRACT MORE CUSTOMERS. UNCLE ZENGAR WAS DEFINITELY AN ODD BIRD.

EVERYBODY KNEW THIS GUY, BUT NOBODY KNEW WHAT HE WAS LIKE BEFORE OR WHERE HE CAME FROM. IT WAS A GREAT MYSTERY TO ALL CONSPIRACY THEORY BUFFS, WHO THUS GOT A WIDE FIELD FOR THEIR CONJECTURES. ONE THING WAS CLEAR, ZENGAR ONE-EYED WAS HERE AND REGULARLY MOVED WITH THE TROOPS, ALBEIT IN THE STABLE, OR RATHER THE 'ENTERTAINMENT' PART OF IT.

FAINT LIGHT FILTERED INTO THE HANGAR THROUGH THE SINTERED HATCHES, WHICH WERE SUPPOSED TO MIMIC SOMETHING LIKE THE GLASS USED BY MANKIND IN THE PAST. THE DIFFERENCE, HOWEVER, LAY NOT ONLY IN THEIR IMMEASURABLY GREATER STRENGTH, BUT ALSO IN THE FACT THAT THEY WERE NOT MERELY TRANSPARENT, BUT ALMOST INVISIBLE, AND HENCE GAVE THE ILLUSION THAT HERE AND THERE IN ITS MASSIVE HULL, MADE OF ZENDORIAN KEVLARITE, THERE WERE SIMPLY THE MOST ORDINARY HOLES THROUGH WHICH ONE COULD SAFELY PUT ONE'S HAND.

STEPPING NOW ON A HARD SURFACE AND A FEW METERS AWAY FROM THE AIRCRAFT, SASIA ACTIVATED THE SPEEDER'S SECURITY SYSTEM IN ORDER TO PREVENT ITS MISUSE BY SOME POSSIBLE INTRUDER AND SLOWLY LEFT THE HANGAR THAT SHELTERED MORE

THAN THREE HUNDRED SPEEDER OF DIFFERENT CLASSES. HERE THE KEEN EYE OF THE CONNOISSEUR COULD STOP ON ANY MODEL OF AIRCRAFT. FROM THE LARGEST CLASS OF DESTROYER-CLASS FIGHTERS, SUCH AS SHE PILOTED HERSELF, TO VERY TINY RECONNAISSANCE VEHICLES CALLED ISORENDERS, WHICH WERE, SORT OF, AN AEROSUIT THAT THE PILOT IN QUESTION DONNED IN ORDER TO BE AS INCONSPICUOUS AS POSSIBLE TO ENEMY RADARS.

ON THE WAY OUT OF THE HANGAR, SASIA TURNED AND TOOK ONE LAST LOOK AT HER FIGHTER.

'WHAT A BEAUTY!' SHE THOUGHT.

THE DOOR CLOSED BEHIND HER AND THE HANGAR PLUNGED INTO DARKNESS.

^^^

UNCLE ZENGAR'S TAVERN WAS ABOUT A FIFTEEN MINUTE WALK FROM THE HANGARS, SO THIS ALBEIT SHORT WALK WOULD HAVE A SOBERING EFFECT ON SASIA, THUS HELPING HER COLLECT HER THOUGHTS BEFORE REPORTING. BECAUSE OF THE PLANET'S LOW OXYGEN LEVEL, SHE WAS STILL IN HER PROTECTIVE PILOT SUIT, IN WHICH SHE FELT AS COMFORTABLE AS A BABY FLOATING IN THE AMNIOTIC WATERS OF ITS MOTHER'S WOMB.

ON THE WAY, SHE DIDN'T ENCOUNTER A SINGLE FAMILIAR FACE, ALTHOUGH SHE HAD EXPECTED SUCH A THING WHEN SHE WAS REASSIGNED TO THE SOUTHERN FRONT IN THE LEARNIA AREA, WHICH WAS NORTHEAST OF SYNTHROS, APPEARING AS ITS NATURAL DIAGONAL EXTENSION. IN EFFECT, THIS WAS THE WESTERNMOST PART OF UBUNDER, WHICH WAS EXTREMELY HEAVILY GUARDED NOT ONLY BY THE ROYAL NAVY'S 2ND PILOT DIVISION, BUT ALSO BY A SERIOUS AMOUNT OF INFANTRY AND ARTILLERY.

SINCE THE SEASONS ON ZEGANDARIA WERE SIMILAR TO EARTH'S, IT HAD TO BE AUTUMN BY EARTH STANDARDS NOW. THOUGH THE

HANGAR WHERE SASIA HAD BEEN UNTIL RECENTLY WAS RATHER STUFFY AND WARM, SHE SHIVERED NOW DESPITE HER SUIT'S BUILT-IN HEATING SYSTEM. SHE COULDN'T TELL IF IT WAS DUE TO THE AMBIENT TEMPERATURE OR JUST SOME SORT OF OVEREXERTION BROUGHT ON BY THE FACT THAT SHE HADN'T SLEPT IN ALMOST THREE DAYS.

WITH A MEASURED GAIT, SHE PASSED THE HANGARS, WALKED PAST THE WAREHOUSES, CROSSED THE 'CENTRAL SQUARE' OF THE CAMP, AND IN ITS FURTHEST NORTHWEST CORNER, SPIED WHAT LOOKED LIKE A PORTABLE CAPSULE ABOUT THE SIZE OF A MEDIUM-SIZED HOUSE, SET WELL BACK FROM THE REST OF THE BUILDINGS BY ABOUT TWO HUNDRED METERS. OVERCOME WITH CURIOSITY, SASIA SLOWLY APPROACHED AND EXAMINED THE STRANGE 'STRUCTURE'. HER GAZE FELL ON A TATTERED SIGN THAT READ 'KERSONIAVTIK 102'. SASIA PONDERED. HER INITIAL THOUGHT WAS THAT THIS ESCAPE POD FROM A LARGE SHUTTLE MUST BE VERY OLD, PERHAPS FIFTY ZEGANDARIAN YEARS OLD. SHE REMEMBERED SEEING IT IN SOME TEXTBOOKS, BUT TRY AS SHE MIGHT SHE COULDN'T REMEMBER WHEN OR WHERE.

SUDDENLY HER THOUGHTS WERE INTERRUPTED BY TWO MEN SUDDENLY POPPING THROUGH THE CAPSULE'S ABRUPTLY OPENED HYDRONIC DOOR. THEY WERE LARGE AND BROAD-SHOULDERED. ONE WAS KEITH ENDWALKER, THE SAME FRIEND OF MARK'S WHOSE FATHER WORKED AT THE MINISTRY. THE EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE WAS GRAVE, AND HE LISTENED INTENTLY TO HIS TIPSY INTERLOCUTOR, MAJOR KETROL, WHO WAS EVIDENTLY TELLING HIM SOME INCREDIBLY INTERESTING (AS COULD BE JUDGED FROM THE EXCITED EXPRESSION ON THE MAJOR'S FACE) STORY, WHILE KEITH, OUT OF POLITENESS, MERELY LISTENED AND NODDED SILENTLY FROM TIME TO TIME.

- 'SO I TELL YOU, KEITH, THAT GUARRON HAD COME AT ME, AND WITH HIS SHARP PREDATORY CLAWS WAS AH-AH-AH TO TEAR ME TO PIECES, BUT MY FAITHFUL 'ZIRAULT 400' SAVED ME FROM THE MONSTER,' HE SAID, AND THROUGH HIS LAUGHTER STROKED THE

HUGE PLASMA PISTOL SUSPENDED IN A SPECIAL HOLSTER ON HIS RIGHT LEG.

- 'DEFINITELY AN INTERESTING STORY, MAJOR,' KEITH MUTTERED BARELY AUDIBLY, BUT SASIA SOMEHOW CAUGHT THE MEANING OF WHAT HE SAID.

- 'INTERESTING?,' THE MAJOR STAMMERED SOMEWHAT CONFUSEDLY, MAINLY BECAUSE OF THE HUGE AMOUNT OF THE SHAKE 'THE SUNSET OF THE GUARRONS' HE HAD DRUNK JUST A FEW MINUTES AGO.

HE SCRATCHED HIS NOSE FOR A MOMENT AND TRIED TO CLEAR HIS CLOUDED VISION.

- THIS IS A STORY FOR THE MILLIONS, BOY, JUST WAIT UNTIL I TALK TO A JOURNALIST WHEN WE GET BACK TO ENSARIANAN. THE REPORTS WILL SELL LIKE HOT BREAD. I MIGHT EVEN WRITE A BOOK. - HE ADDED THROUGH A LAUGH, FOR EVERYONE KNEW HIS NOT VERY HIGH EDUCATION, COMPENSATED, HOWEVER, BY AN IMPECCABLE WARRIOR COURAGE, BORDERING, AND SOMETIMES EVEN SURPASSING, THE LIMITS OF SANITY.

- 'THAT'S RIGHT, MAJOR, BUT THAT CAN ONLY HAPPEN IF WE EVER GET BACK TO ENSARIAN ALIVE AND WELL,' KEITH SAID, SEEMINGLY CALM, A SUBTLE NOTE OF TENSION IN HIS VOICE.

THROUGHOUT THE CONVERSATION, SASIA HAD BEEN LURKING BEHIND SOME BOXES THAT HAD BEEN THROWN HAPHAZARDLY JUST FIVE OR SIX METERS FROM THE CAPSULE. SOMEHOW SHE THOUGHT THE YOUNG MAN HAD NOTICED HER, BUT SEEMED TO IGNORE HER PRESENCE. NO, IT JUST SEEMED THAT WAY TO HER.

- 'YOU'RE RIGHT, MATE, BUT AS THE POET SAID, 'HOPE DIES LAST,' HE PRONOUNCED IN A HALF-THOUGHT, HALF-JOKING VOICE AND GIGGLED DRUNKENLY.

- 'COME ON, MAJOR, IT'S TIME TO GO HOME, WHO KNOWS WHAT'S WAITING FOR US TOMORROW,' KEITH SEEMED TO COMMAND, AND



WITHOUT LISTENING TO HIS RAMBLINGS ANY LONGER, HE DRAGGED HIM, OR RATHER CARRIED HIM ALMOST ON HIS BACK, TO ONE OF THE NEIGHBOURING BUILDINGS. THE DARKNESS SWALLOWED THEM UP. THE HYDRONIC DOOR OF THE OTHER BUILDING OPENED AND THEN CLOSED.

SASIA STOOD FOR ANOTHER MINUTE OR TWO BEFORE EMERGING FROM HER HIDING PLACE. WHEN SHE FINALLY MADE UP HER MIND, SHE STOOD ONCE MORE IN FRONT OF THE ENTRANCE TO THE CAPSULE, ABOVE WHICH GLOWED THE WORDS 'WELCOME, OUR BRAVE WARRIORS OF UBUNDER!'. AND IN SHE WENT.

THE INSIDE OF THE CAPSULE WAS WELL LIT AND, AS IT SEEMED TO SASIA, FAR TOO COZY FOR A MARCHING SOLDIER'S INN IN A CAMP IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. IT WAS JUST THAT THE WHOLE SETTING BROUGHT YOU HOME. THE AREA OF THE ROOM WAS NO MORE THAN THIRTY, THIRTY-FIVE SQUARE METERS AT MOST, BUT SOMEONE'S SKILLED HAND HAD LAID IT OUT IN SUCH A WAY, USING EVEN THE SMALLEST AND MOST INSIGNIFICANT CORNERS, THAT THE INSIDE OF THE CAPSULE SEEMED LARGER THAN ONE MIGHT EXPECT LOOKING AT IT FROM THE OUTSIDE.

SASIA SWEEPED HER GAZE OVER THE ENTIRE MAKESHIFT 'ESTABLISHMENT'. IN FACT, THE TIME WAS AROUND 10PM AND IT WASN'T VERY FULL, MAINLY DUE TO THE FACT THAT THE PILOTS HAD TO BE SOBER FOR THEIR MORNING TRAINING AND ALSO FOR THE PATROLLING OVER THE ENTIRE SURROUNDING AREA THAT THEY WERE DOING IN SHIFTS. THE INFANTRYMEN, NOT SUFFERING FROM SUCH SCRUPLES AS THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO BE CANNON FODDER, WERE FAR MORE FREQUENT VISITORS TO THIS PLACE, BUT WHO KNOWS WHY THEY WERE NOT EVEN IN ABUNDANCE TONIGHT. IN FACT, IF IT WEREN'T FOR THE TWO TABLES IN THE CORNER THAT WERE OCCUPIED AND ZENGAR ONE-EYED BUSTLING AROUND THE MAKESHIFT 'BARPLOT', AS SEVERAL ARMY PLASMA WEAPON AMMO CRATES TAILORED TOGETHER WITH METAL BRACKETS COULD BE CALLED WITH A LITTLE IMAGINATION, THE ENTIRE PLACE WOULD HAVE BEEN COMPLETELY EMPTY.

- 'GOOD EVENING, MISS,' SAID ZENGAR IN A SLIGHTLY MYSTERIOUS VOICE, 'WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE?'

- 'AND WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?,' REPLIED SASIA, A LITTLE CLUMSILY, CONTRARY TO HER OTHERWISE RATHER CALM AND COMPOSED NATURE, AS THE BARTENDER'S VOICE WAS SLIGHTLY IRRITATING HER.

- 'THE SPECIALTY OF THE PLACE IS THE SUNSET GUARRON SHAKE, REAL MAGIC IF YOU ASK ME,' THE ONE-EYED REPLIED CORRUPTINGLY.

- 'YEAH, I SAW THAT ALREADY, AN ENCHANTED ONE OUTSIDE,' SASIA LET OUT WITHOUT ASKING.

- 'YOU MUST BE REFERRING TO MAJOR KETROL,' ZENGAR SPOKE WITH SOME RESPECT NOW, 'HE IS PROBABLY MY MOST FREQUENT CLIENT'.

- 'I NOTICED,' SASIA BARELY FORCED HERSELF TO REPLY.

WHILE THIS CONVERSATION WAS TAKING PLACE, THE MAN IN THE SHADOWS, SEATED AT THE TABLE IN THE FARTHEST CORNER OF THE CAPSULE, SEEMED TO MOVE SUBTLY, OR SO IT SEEMED TO SASIA.

- 'WHO IS HE?,' SHE INQUIRED.

- 'I DON'T KNOW,' ZENGAR ADMITTED, BUT THIS TIME THERE WAS NO JOULARITY OR INSOLENCEN IN HIS TONE, 'BUT HE WARNED ME THAT A YOUNG LADY WOULD BE ARRIVING TONIGHT AND TOLD ME TO BE POLITE TO HER.'

- 'WELL, YOU ARE OBVIOUSLY FOLLOWING HIS ORDERS VERY STRICTLY,' SASIA SAID IN A SLIGHTLY SOUR TONE, LEAVING THE GAPING ZENGAR AT THE BAR.

IT TOOK HER ONLY FOUR OR FIVE STEPS TO FIND HERSELF IN THE STRANGER'S DARK CORNER. HIS FACE WASN'T VISIBLE, BUT JUDGING BY HIS SILHOUETTE, ONE WOULD HAVE SAID HE WAS MILITARY, AND NOT JUST ANY MILITARY AT THAT.

- 'WELL, GENERAL ZENGAL, SO YOU WISHED TO MEET ME IN THIS HOLE?', SASIA UTTERED QUITE DISPASSIONATELY.

- 'IT IS SAFEST HERE,' SAID THE VOICE.

- 'AND THE PEOPLE AT THE NEXT TABLE, OR THE BARTENDER,' SASIA ADDED.

- 'DON'T WORRY, THEY'RE TRUSTED PEOPLE,' THE VOICE SAID IN THE SAME TONE. 'WELL, REPORT BACK LIEUTENANT, WHAT NEW THINGS YOU'VE LEARNED IN THE LAST THREE DAYS SINCE YOU'VE BEEN GONE.'

SASIA PAUSED BRIEFLY, BUT PRUDENTLY KEPT HER REMARK SILENT. THEN SHE BEGAN HER PRESENTATION TO HER SUPERIORS IN A PERFECTLY CALM VOICE:

- 'THE SITUATION ISN'T ROSY AT ALL,' SHE SAID. 'I FLEW OVER XANDERAR, ALL THE WAY TO THE PLATEAU OF DEATH, AND THERE WAS NOTHING BUT DESTRUCTION AND BLOODIED CORPSES EVERYWHERE.'

- AND?

- AND NO SIGN OF LIFE, AT LEAST AT FIRST GLANCE. IT WAS LIKE I'D FLOWN OVER A DESERT, EVEN THOUGH XANDERAR IS STILL A SEMI-DESERT. YOU KNOW, SIR, AT ONE TIME I FELT LIKE I WAS THE LAST HUMAN BEING ON THIS PLANET.

THE SILHOUETTE LISTENED IN SILENCE. SASIA CONTINUED:

- I DECIDED TO TRY TO CONTACT OUR NORTHERN OUTPOSTS IN RODWELL, BUT I ONLY GOT SKETCHY SIGNALS THAT WEREN'T VERY CLEAR. I CHECKED ALL THE FREQUENCIES, TRYING TO COVER THE FULL RANGE, BUT I KEPT HEARING THE SAME THING.

THE SILHOUETTE SHIFTED BARELY NOTICEABLY.

- 'SPEAK MORE CLEARLY, LIEUTENANT,' GENERAL ZENGAL CALLED SUDDENLY.

- 'I MEAN, THE SOUNDS WEREN'T VERY HUMAN, SIR,' SASIA MUTTERED, SOMEWHAT WORRIEDLY.

- 'GUARRONS?,' CALLED THE VOICE IN THE DARKNESS.

- 'I DON'T THINK SO, SIR, WHATEVER IT WAS WASN'T QUITE HUMAN.,' THE PILOT REPLIED.'

- 'LIEUTENANT, IS THAT WHAT YOU HAVE TO TELL ME IN THREE DAYS OF RECONNAISSANCE WITH ONE OF OUR MOST ADVANCED SPEEDERS?,' THE VOICE CUT IN SOMEWHAT ABRUPTLY.

- SORRY, SIR, THAT'S ALL. BESIDES, I MADE RECORDINGS OF THOSE SOUNDS.

- 'RECORDINGS, YOU, SAY?,' THE VOICE MURMURED, SOMEWHAT DRAGGED OUT, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IT OCCURRED TO SASIA THAT GENERAL ZENGAL'S VOICE WAS SOMEHOW PECULIAR, BUT SHE CHOSE TO REMAIN SILENT.

- 'YOU SEE, LIEUTENANT,' THE VOICE SUDDENLY BECAME EVEN AGAIN, 'THE SITUATION IS SUCH THAT YOUR SUPERIORS HAVE DECIDED TO SEND YOU TO LABOUR COLONY 206. THAT'S ALL FOR NOW.'

THOUGH PLUNGED IN DARKNESS, THE SILHOUETTE FLICKERED AND SOMEHOW DISTORTED.

- EXPECT FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS, LIEUTENANT, AND NOW DRINK ONE TO MY HEALTH.

THERE WAS A SLIGHT POP AND THE SILHOUETTE DISAPPEARED, AND WITH IT THE DARKNESS AROUND. THE HOLOGRAM DISINTEGRATED. THERE WAS SILENCE. LONG AND PROLONGED. LIKE AN ETERNITY.

SASIA LOOKED AROUND TO SEE THE BARTENDER OR THE PEOPLE AT THE NEXT TABLE, BUT THE CAPSULE WAS COMPLETELY EMPTY.

SUDDENLY SHE BEGAN TO REALIZE THAT THE SITUATION WAS EVEN WORSE THAN SHE HAD IMAGINED. THE GENERAL'S TEXT WAS CODED,

AND THE FACT THAT HE WASN'T PERSONALLY PRESENT AT THE MEETING WAS SOMEWHAT EXPLAINABLE. AS AN OFFICER, SASIA WAS EXPECTED TO LEAD THE CAMP'S AVAILABLE AIR FORCE. SO THAT YOUNG MAN AND THE OLD MAN WHO HAD COME OUT WERE JUST A MIRAGE IN DISGUISE?

SASIA HAD HEARD OF LABOR COLONY 206. AS AN OFFICER, SHE HAD ACCESS TO SOME OF THE CLASSIFIED INFORMATION. BUT ITS WHEREABOUTS WERE KNOWN ONLY TO A HANDFUL OF OFFICERS IN THE COMMAND STAFF OF THE ROYAL UBUNDER FLEET.

'SO THEY'VE DECIDED TO COMMAND FROM A DISTANCE AND WE'RE LEFT FOR CANNON FODDER, THAT EXPLAINS RODWELL'S SILENCE.'

IN FACT, IT WAS ONLY NOW THAT SHE REALIZED HOW TIRED SHE ACTUALLY WAS. SHE WALKED OVER TO THE BARPLOT, WHICH THANKFULLY WASN'T A HOLOGRAM, AND POURED HERSELF A SMALL AMOUNT OF GUARRON'S BAY SHAKE FROM A WESTERN BOTTLE. SHE DRANK IT ON THE EX.

^^^

SASIA SHOOK HER HEAD. APPARENTLY DRINKING SHAKES WASN'T HER ELEMENT - UNLIKE DRIVING A COMBAT SPEEDER. THE YOUNG WOMAN CHEERED AT THAT THOUGHT, BUT SUDDENLY CAME TO HER SENSES AND GLANCED AROUND. SHE WAS STILL IN THE DARK CAPSULE, WITH NOT A SOUL ALIVE BUT HER. SUDDENLY AN ALARM SOUNDED. LONG AND SHRILL.

- 'THE GUARRON ARE ATTACKING US!,' CAME THE SOLDIERS' SCREAMS, FILLED WITH TERROR AND FEAR.

SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A CRASHING SOUND AND SOME POWERFUL EARTHQUAKE-LIKE TREMOR.

IT DIDN'T TAKE SASIA LONG TO COME TO HER SENSES. DESPITE HER FRAIL AGE, SHE HAD BEEN IN QUITE A FEW BATTLES AND HAD A GOOD

IDEA OF HOW THE GUARRON CONDUCTED THEIR ATTACKS. 'NO TIME TO WASTE!' SHE THOUGHT, 'THEY'LL PROBABLY ATTACK THE MAIN GENERATOR TO BRING DOWN THE DEFENSES AROUND THE CAMP.

SHE THEN CHECKED HER SUIT'S OXYGEN LEVEL. IT WAS CRITICALLY LOW. SHE HAD ABOUT AN HOUR'S SUPPLY LEFT. LIGHTNING QUICK, SHE LOWERED HERSELF AND PULLED OUT A SMALL COMBAT PLASMA PISTOL, THE KIND EVERY NAVY PILOT HAD. THEN SHE CROUCHED AT THE SIDE OF THE DOOR. SHE DIDN'T WANT TO RISK SOME RANDOM BOUNCE KILLING HER INGLORIOUSLY JUST WHEN SO MUCH WAS EXPECTED OF HER.

SHE SIGHED.

SHE PULLED THE SAFETY OFF THE GUN.

AND PRESSED THE SENSOR BUTTON ON THE HYDRON DOOR.

INDESCRIBABLE CHAOS UNFOLDED BEFORE SASIA'S EYES - AN INDESCRIBABLE SLAUGHTER. SHE WISHED SHE HAD A HIDING PLACE, LIKE THE BOXES SHE'D HUDDLED BEHIND THE NIGHT BEFORE, LISTENING TO THE CONVERSATION BETWEEN KEITH AND THE MAJOR, BUT THEY WERE GONE. INSTEAD, A HUGE HOLE, CAUSED BY AN EXPLOSION, YAWNED IN THE SAME SPOT, MORE THAN TWO METERS DEEP.

SOLDIERS WERE RUNNING EVERYWHERE, AND DESPITE THEIR MILITARY DISCIPLINE, FEAR WAS READ ON THEIR FACES. FEAR OF THE UNKNOWN OUTCOME OF EVENTS. OR RATHER, OF THEIR COMPLETELY UNEXPECTED COURSE.

SASIA KNEW AT A GLANCE. THEY HADN'T BEEN EXPECTING A GUARRONS ATTACK AT THIS EXACT MOMENT, MUCH LESS ASSUMING THE MONSTROUS CREATURES WOULD BE ABLE TO OVERCOME THE BASE'S ENERGY SHIELD. BUT THERE WAS NO TIME FOR SUCH THOUGHTS. THEY HAD TO ACT, AND ACT IMMEDIATELY. SHE KNEW THAT NO ONE IN THE CAMP KNEW HER, AND SHE WAS ONLY ALLOWED IN BECAUSE OF HER SECRET PASSWORD AND HER OFFICER'S CARD MARKED 'TOP SECRET'. IT WAS FOR THIS REASON THAT THE CAMP

AUTHORITIES HAD ALLOWED HER TO STAY FOR A DAY OR TWO WITHOUT FURTHER INTEREST. THEY KNEW FROM EXPERIENCE THAT TOO MUCH CURIOSITY, EVEN IN THESE TROUBLED TIMES, COULD EASILY GET THEM COURT-MARTIALED, AND THE CONSEQUENCES WERE MORE THAN CLEAR.

CLUTCHING THE PLASMA PISTOL TIGHTLY IN HER HAND, ON THE RUN SHE SOMEHOW MADE IT NEAR THAT BUILDING SHE'D SEEN KEITH AND THE MAJOR ENTER THE NIGHT BEFORE.

ONLY NOW, WITH HER BACK AGAINST IT, DID SHE HAVE A CHANCE TO GLANCE AROUND FOR A MOMENT AND REMAIN SHAKEN.

THE GREEN HUMANOID LIZARDS WERE ATTACKING THE SHIELD WITH SOME SORT OF DEVICE THAT, STRANGELY, SHE COULDN'T SEE. THE DEFENSIVE WALLS, MADE OF HUGE SLABS OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE, WERE BENT, AND IN MANY PLACES GAPPED LARGE HOLES, CAUSED NOT ONLY BY THE BIOLOGICAL ACID OF THE LARGE GROYANDUS USED BY THE GUARRONS AS HORSES, BUT ALSO BY THEIR SHARP AND HARD AS ZEGANDARIAN CRYSTALS CLAWS. THE GROYANDUS WERE TRULY POISONOUS CREATURES WITH THE APPEARANCE OF HUGE WILD PIGS, AS IF THEY HAD EMERGED FROM HELL ITSELF. JUST THE SIGHT OF THEM HAD A DEMORALIZING EFFECT ON THE SOLDIERS.

THE SITUATION WAS INDEED TENSE, AND THE CAMP'S DEFENSES WERE MELTING. SOME OF THE INFANTRYMEN HAD RISEN UP AND WERE EVEN ENGAGED IN OPEN HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT WITH A FEW OF THE POISONOUS CREATURES THAT HAD MANAGED TO LEAP OVER THE FIVE METER HIGH DEFENSIVE WALL.

DUE TO THE LACK OF AMMUNITION, MANY OF THEM WERE USING THE 'MYELITE ZETKANK 240' SNIPER RIFLES AS SIMPLE CLUBS WITH WHICH TO STRIKE THESE BRUTAL CREATURES. BLOODY PITH WAS LITERALLY FLYING IN ALL DIRECTIONS. SEVERED HUMAN AND GUARRON LIMBS ROLLED IN THE DUST. BUT THE MONSTROUS CREATURES DID NOT GIVE UP, BUT THREW THEMSELVES FORWARD WITH EVEN GREATER GUSTO AND MOMENTUM.

SUDDENLY AN INFANTRYMAN WAS PIERCED THROUGH A BREACH IN THE WALL BY A SHARP GUARRON CLAW, AND HUNG UPON IT LIKE A PITIFUL RAG-DOLL DEVOID OF LIFE. BLOOD FLOWED FROM HIS MOUTH, BUT WHAT TERRIFIED SASIA MOST WERE HIS LIFELESS, BULGING EYES, WHICH LOOKED AS IF THEY WERE ABOUT TO BURST FROM THEIR ORBITS. IT WAS A REPULSIVE SIGHT. IN THAT INSTANT THE YOUNG WOMAN REMEMBERED THE STRANGE SIGNALS SHE HAD HEARD NEAR RODWELL.

THOUGH IT ALL HAPPENED IN JUST A FEW SECONDS, SASIA'S ATTENTION WAS SO ABSORBED THAT SHE DIDN'T NOTICE HOW SOMETHING MOVED IMPERCEPTIBLY BEHIND HER.

- 'LOOK OUT!,' A VOICE SHOUTED BEHIND HER AND SHE FELT SOMEONE OR SOMETHING PUSH HER.

SASIA HEARD A WHISTLE JUST INCHES FROM WHERE HER HEAD HAD BEEN LESS THAN A SECOND AGO. THOUGH WELL-TRAINED, PULLED BY THE MOMENTUM OF HER OWN BODY, SHE COULDN'T KEEP HER BALANCE AND FELL TO THE GROUND, BUT ROLLED IMMEDIATELY, TAKING UP A SHOOTING STANCE.

IN THAT INSTANT, SASIA SAW THE YOUTH FROM LAST NIGHT IN A LIFE AND DEATH STRUGGLE WITH A LARGE GUARRON CLAD IN HEAVY METAL ARMOR. THE BEAST WAS NEARLY TWICE THE YOUTH'S SIZE, AND TOWERED OVER HIM BY A FULL FOOT IN HEIGHT, THOUGH THE OTHER MAN WAS INDEED TALL - PERHAPS NEARLY TWO METERS. THE YOUTH HAD FLUNG HIMSELF ON THE GUARRON'S BACK AND WAS RIDING IT LIKE A HORSE, GRIPPING ITS THICK GREEN NECK TIGHTLY.

ALTHOUGH IT WAS EVIDENT THAT THE YOUTH POSSESSED GREAT PHYSICAL STRENGTH, THE BATTLE WAS VERY UNEQUAL. THE GUARRON LUNGED WILDLY AND TRIED TO THROW HIM OFF HIS BACK, BUT FAILED AS KEITH CLAMPED HIS HANDS EVEN TIGHTER INTO THE IRON GRIP AROUND HIS NECK. THE HUMANOID LIZARD WENT STRAIGHT BERSERK AND BEGAN TO SHAKE, TRYING TO WEAKEN HIS GRIP. AFTER THAT DIDN'T HELP EITHER, THE MONSTER SUDDENLY CROUCHED DOWN AND PULLED SOME SMALL DEVICE OUT OF HIS



BATTLE SUIT, ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY PRESSING SOME BUTTON. THERE WAS A SLIGHT CRACKLE, AND SASIA COULD CLEARLY SEE THAT IT WAS A LASER BLADE.

AS CUNNING AS THE CREATURE WAS, HOWEVER, KEITH WASN'T YESTERDAY'S MAN AND NIMBLY BOUNCED AWAY, PUSHING OFF THE SIDE OF THE BUILDING WITH HIS FEET LIKE AN UNDEAD SPRING JUST WAITING FOR THE RIGHT MOMENT TO SPRING OUT OF PLACE. THE GUARRON COULDN'T REACT IN TIME AND SLAMMED DOWN UNDER THE YOUTH'S THRUST, DRAGGING HIM INTO THE DUST AFTER IT. THE LASER BLADE WHIPPED TO THE SIDE, FAILING TO DELIVER THE INSIDIOUS BLOW. DESPITE KEITH'S SEEMING SUPERIORITY, THE GUARRON SPUN SHARPLY AND DELIVERED A VICIOUS ELBOW STRIKE WITH HIS HEAVILY ARMoured ARM. THE YOUTH REELED BACK LIKE A RAG DOLL, AND WOULD HAVE NEARLY STRUCK HIS HEAD AGAINST THE WALL HAD IT NOT BEEN FOR THE TIMELY REACTION OF THE MAJOR, WHO CAUGHT HIM IN A FLASH AND THUS AVERTED THIS ALMOST INEVITABLE DOOM. THE GUARRON CAME AT THEM IN A FLASH, BARING ITS CANINE TEETH LIKE A HUNGRY WOLF.

SASIA SAW ALL THIS AS IN A DREAM, FOR IT HAPPENED EXTREMELY QUICKLY. IN A STRANGE EUPHORIA, INTOXICATED BY THE ADRENALINE RUSH, SHE HELD HER BREATH FOR A SECOND, TOOK AIM AND FIRED, GRAZING THE BEAST RIGHT IN THE BACK OF THE HEAD. THE MONSTER'S MASSIVE GREEN HEAD BURST OPEN LIKE A RIPE WATERMELON, AND BLOOD AND SHARDS OF BRAIN SPLATTERED KEITH AND THE MAJOR, WHO WERE A FEW FEET AWAY.

SASIA WASN'T THINKING OF ANYTHING ELSE AT THAT MOMENT.

THE BATTLE OF LIFE AND DEATH WAS OVER.

^^^

- 'LET'S GO! WE HAVE NO TIME TO WASTE!,' KEITH PICKED HER UP OFF THE GROUND BEFORE SHE CAME TO HER SENSES.

- 'WHO ARE YOU?,' ASKED SASIA AS THEY RAN, TRYING NOT TO MAKE HER QUESTION SOUND DELIBERATE.

- 'WELL, IT'S MORE LIKE WE, MY GIRL, SHOULD BE ASKING YOU WHO YOU ARE!,' THE MAJOR SNARLED, TRYING TO KEEP UP THEIR PACE.

- 'LIEUTENANT SASIA LESHOND OF THE ROYAL NAVY, PILOT OF A DESTROYER-CLASS BATTLE SPEEDER,' THE GIRL RECITED ALMOST IN ONE BREATH.

AS SOON AS THEY HEARD HER QUICK OPENING TIRADE THE TWO MEN, DESPITE RUNNING TO AVOID ENEMY SHOTS, LOOKED AT HER WITH SOME RESPECT.

- 'THAT EXPLAINS YOUR ACCURATE SHOOTING, MY LADY,' KEITH ADDRESSED HER A LITTLE MORE FLATTERINGLY. 'YOU MIGHT SAY YOU SAVED OUR LIVES,' HE ADDED.

- 'CUT THAT CRAP,' MAJOR SAID IN HER TYPICAL FLOWERY STYLE, 'WE CAN'T JUST GO AROUND HIDING FOREVER. WE NEED TO FORM SOME SORT OF PLAN OF ACTION, BECAUSE YOU CAN SEE THAT THINGS HAVE STARTED TO GET QUITE...'

HE WOULD HAVE CONTINUED HIS RAMBLING IF KEITH HADN'T SQUEEZED HIS HAND IN TIME.

- 'LET'S AT LEAST INTRODUCE OURSELVES TO THIS WORTHY LADY, JERRY,' KEITH SAID BREATHLESSLY AS THEY RAN FROM ONE COVER TO ANOTHER.

- 'ALL RIGHT THEN,' AGREED THE MAJOR WITH SOME RELUCTANCE. 'I'M JERRY KETROL, MAJOR OF THE 2ND INFANTRY DIVISION, WHICH IS CURRENTLY SUPPOSED TO BE DEFENDING THIS PROOCLET CAMP.

THE MAJOR PRONOUNCED THE PENULTIMATE WORD AT LENGTH, FOR HE STUMBLED, TRIPPING OVER A CLOD OF EARTH.

MEANWHILE, WHILE THIS CONVERSATION HAD BEEN GOING ON, THE MONSTROUS CREATURES HAD MANAGED TO OPEN A HOLE IN THE

CAMP'S MASSIVE DEFENSIVE WALLS WIDE ENOUGH FOR THEM TO ENTER, EVEN MOUNTED BY THE MONSTROUS GROYANDUS.

- 'WE NEED TO GET TO THE HANGARS, OR WE MAY SOON BE PANCAKES,' SASIA REPLIED.

THE THREE OF THEM LOOKED AT EACH OTHER AND COULD ONLY MANAGE A GLANCE. SASIA WAS THE ONLY ONE OF THEM CAPABLE OF FLYING AN AERIAL VEHICLE, AND THEY, BEING INFANTRYMEN, WOULD PROVIDE HER WITH THE COVER SHE NEEDED TO REACH THEM, UNLESS OF COURSE THE HIDEOUS LIZARD-LIKE CREATURES REDUCED THEM TO ASHES WITH THEIR PRIMITIVE BUT FAR FROM HARMLESS MEANS OF COMBAT.

SASIA TURNED THE CORNER, LETTING THEM SORT THEMSELVES OUT AS BEST THEY COULD, FOR TIME WAS RUNNING OUT ON THEM LIKE SAND IN A CLOCK. THE SITUATION WAS HOPELESS INDEED. IN THE COMMOTION SHE, BEING A PRETTY GOOD PHYSIOGNOMIST, RECOGNIZED THE TORN BODIES OF DEAD YOUNG PILOTS. IRONICALLY, SOME OF THEM HAD VISITED OLD UNCLE ZENGAR'S PUB THE NIGHT BEFORE, AND IT HAD PLAYED A RATHER BAD JOKE ON THEM. BLOOD! PUDDLES OF BLOOD!

SASIA KNEW THAT THE HANGARS WERE NO MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED METERS AWAY, BUT CROSSING THEM PROVED TO BE A LIVING HELL. THERE WERE BURST BARRELS OF INTERRON FUEL ROLLING ALL OVER THE BASE, ALREADY BURNING HEAVILY. APPARENTLY THE HIDEOUS CREATURES POSSESSED ENOUGH INTELLIGENCE TO USE THEM FOR THEIR INTENDED PURPOSE AND TO DESTROY WHAT WAS LEFT OF THIS NEST OF HUMAN CIVILIZATION.

THE YOUNG WOMAN DIDN'T HAVE MUCH TIME TO THINK, HOWEVER, AS A LARGE GUARRON RIDING A HUGE GROYANDUS NEARLY SWEEPED HER AWAY. HE SPED PAST HER LIKE A MOVIE, BUT FORTUNATELY DIDN'T NOTICE HER AT ALL. WAS IT THE FLAMES THAT CAUSED THIS, OR WAS IT JUST THAT THE GUARRONS HAD POOR EYESIGHT BY NATURE?

SASIA CRAWLED FORWARD WITH ALL HER STRENGTH. INCH BY INCH. DEBRIS FLEW OVER HER HEAD AND FRAGMENTED GUNSHOTS SOUNDED.

'THEY WON'T SURVIVE LONG. THEY JUST DON'T STAND A CHANCE,' SHE THOUGHT.

THE HANGARS WERE CLOSE NOW, BUT HERE WAS A NEW OBSTACLE IN FRONT OF HER. THERE WERE ALREADY THREE LARGE GROYANDUS AT THE ENTRANCE, BUT THE GUARRON RIDERS WERE NOWHERE TO BE SEEN, OR AT LEAST SASIA COULDN'T MAKE THEM OUT AMIDST THE FLAMES AND THICK SMOKE ENGULFING THE BASE.

IT WAS UNTHINKABLE TO ATTEMPT ENTRY THROUGH THE PARADE ENTRANCE. THEN SHE REMEMBERED THAT, AS AN OFFICER WITH A SECRET CARD, SHE HAD ALSO BEEN SHOWN A SECRET PASSAGE THROUGH WHICH SHE COULD ENTER THE HANGAR IN SECRET. 'WORTH A TRY,' SHE TOLD HERSELF.

REACHING THAT SECRET PASSAGE, HOWEVER, WAS BY NO MEANS EASY. ADJACENT TO THE SOLDIERS' QUARTERS WAS A SPECIAL PREFABRICATED PUMPING STATION FOR WATER, OR RATHER FOR A SUBSTRATE FROM WHICH, AFTER ELABORATE PROCESSING, WATER WAS EXTRACTED. SASIA DECIDED TO TRY THIS LAST WAY OUT BEFORE THE ENEMY FINALLY CUT OFF ABSOLUTELY ALL POSSIBLE EXITS.

THE PROBLEM WAS THAT IN HER PARTIALLY CHAOTIC WANDERING, SASIA HAD LEFT HIM A LITTLE OUT OF HER WAY. NOW SHE HAD TO MAKE A SMALL TURN, BUT ORIENTATION WAS A BIG PROBLEM. WITH THE PLASMA WEAPONS FIRING CONTINUOUSLY, ANY, EVEN MOMENTARY, RISE FROM THE GROUND WOULD MEAN MORTAL DANGER. THE GIRL WONDERED WHAT TO DO, AS SHE CLEARLY REALIZED THAT THE SALVATION OF ALL THREE DEPENDED ON IT.

THEN SUDDENLY SHE FELT SOMETHING WAS KILLING HER. SASIA SOMEHOW SLIPPED HER HAND UNDER HER BELLY TO CHECK IF SHE WAS INJURED. ALL SORTS OF CRAZY THOUGHTS WENT THROUGH HER

MIND. HOWEVER, SHE SOON REALIZED THAT SHE WAS LYING ON A BARELY NOTICEABLE MANHOLE IN THE GROUND. 'APPARENTLY THIS IS THE ONLY WAY TO ESCAPE,' SHE THOUGHT, OPENING THE HATCH AND DARKNESS ENVELOPED HER.

^^^

TWISTED IN TWO, SASIA CRAWLED INTO THE NARROW SHAFT, WHICH WAS QUITE OXYGEN-POOR, AND SHE COULD CLEARLY SENSE THIS EVEN THROUGH THE FILTERS OF HER SUIT. IT WAS A GOOD THING HER SUIT STILL HAD SOME RESERVES, OR SHE WOULD SURELY HAVE SUFFOCATED.

SHE HAD TO MAKE IT THROUGH THIS LAST OBSTACLE, THIS NARROW TUNNEL, AT ALL COSTS, OTHERWISE IT MIGHT TURN INTO HER COFFIN ONCE THE DEBRIS FROM THE HALF-DESTROYED BASE LITTERED THE HATCH SHE HAD ENTERED THROUGH. OF THAT THERE COULD BE NO DOUBT. THE WAY COULD ONLY BE FORWARD!

THOUGH SHE HAD CURLED UP IN A RELATIVELY SAFE HAVEN FOR THE MOMENT, SASIA COULD HEAR THE RUMBLE OF THE BATTLE ABOVE, AND SHE COULD ALREADY SENSE QUITE CLEARLY THAT THE END WAS NEAR. THE MAIDEN DID NOT LET THESE UNHAPPY THOUGHTS ENTER HER HEAD, BUT ON THE CONTRARY REDOUBLED HER ZEAL AND CRAWLED INTO THE NARROW DUNGEON, REMINISCENT OF AN INFERNAL INTESTINE, WITH EVEN MORE GUSTO AND VERVE. AFTER ABOUT TWENTY METERS, SHE HEARD A GASP, SO QUIET THAT IF IT WEREN'T FOR HER PHENOMENAL SENSES, SHE MIGHT NOT HAVE EVEN PAID ATTENTION TO IT.

FROM THE MAIN TUNNEL BEGAN A FORK, LIKE A SMALL ALCOVE THAT SEEMED TO HAVE A PERSON IN IT. SASIA STRAINED, BUT TRY AS SHE MIGHT SHE COULD MAKE OUT NOTHING MORE THAN A BLURRY SILHOUETTE.

- 'IMAGINE RIGHT AWAY WHO YOU ARE,' SHE SAID FIERCELY, POINTING HER ARMY PLASMA PISTOL AT THE ALCOVE.

A SECOND LATER A MAN WHOSE FACE WAS VERY FAMILIAR TO HER EMERGED FROM THERE. HE WAS OF A SOMEWHAT INDETERMINATE AGE, BUT IN ANY CASE FAR FROM BEING IN HIS PRIME, THE EXPRESSION ON HIS FACE RESEMBLING SOME SORT OF SLIGHT AND ODD SMILE, EVEN AS THE MAN WAS COMPLETELY SERIOUS, HIS SINGLE EYE LOOKING AT HER QUESTIONINGLY.

- 'ZENGAR ONE-EYED - AT YOUR SERVICE, MADAM,' HE SNAPPED, QUITE UNCEREMONIOUSLY.

SASIA FELT AS IF HER WORLD WAS SPINNING, BUT SHE HAD TO BEAR WITH THIS MAN'S SOMEWHAT IRRITATING NATURE.

- 'WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE,' SHE HISSED. SHE WAS ABOUT TO ADD 'I THOUGHT YOU WERE A HOLOGRAM' BUT REFRAINED, REALIZING HOW SILLY AND INAPPROPRIATE SUCH A STATEMENT WOULD BE IN THIS CASE.'

- 'THE SAME AS YOU, MADAM. I'M GUARDING MY LIFE, OR AT LEAST TRYING TO.,' HE SAID WITH A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF INSOLENCIE IN HIS VOICE.

- 'IF YOU'RE HERE THEN YOU KNOW WHERE THIS TUNNEL LEADS, DON'T YOU?,' SASIA CUT TO THE CHASE.

- MOREOVER, MADAM, I AM EVEN PREPARED TO TAKE YOU PERSONALLY TO LABOUR COLONY 206. BUT IT WON'T BE FOR FREE.

SASIA WAS STUNNED. IT WAS POSSIBLE THAT THE VILE LITTLE SLUG WAS BLUFFING. HIS QUIRKY APPEARANCE ALONE DIDN'T INSPIRE MUCH CONFIDENCE IN HER. WHAT IF HE ATTACKED HER IN THE BACK. ON THE OTHER HAND, SHE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO TRUST HIM, AT LEAST UNTIL THEY GOT OUT OF THIS DAMNED TUNNEL.

- 'ALL RIGHT,' SHE REPLIED AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE, 'WHAT DO YOU WANT IN RETURN?'

- 'AH, NOT LIKE THAT,' HE REPLIED WITH A WRY SMILE, 'CHANGE YOUR TONE TO A KINDER ONE AND SHOW AT LEAST A SMALL SHOW OF

TRUST. AFTER ALL, WE CAN BOTH HELP EACH OTHER TO GET OUT OF THIS HELL.'

- 'WHAT ARE YOUR TERMS?,' ASKED SASIA, SOFTER THIS TIME.

- 'THAT'S BETTER NOW,' THE STRANGE MAN MURMURED REASSURINGLY.

THE SHORTNESS OF BREATH IN THE TUNNEL HAD BEGUN TO BECOME INTOLERABLE TO SASIA AS WELL, AND IT WAS CLEAR THAT THE OXYGEN IN HER PROTECTIVE SUIT WAS NOW ABOUT TO RUN OUT. IF THEY DIDN'T AT LEAST GET TO THE SURFACE, THEY WOULDN'T SURVIVE.

- 'I WANT YOU TO TAKE ME WITH YOU TO RODWELL,' THE ONE SHOUTED, NEITHER IN WEDGE NOR SLEEVE.

THIS PUZZLED SASIA EVEN MORE.

- 'HOW DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS?,' SHE STAMMERED.

- 'I OVERHEARD SOMETHING OF YOUR CONVERSATION WITH GENERAL ZENGAL,' THE OTHER SNEERED.

- WHAT IF I REFUSE?

- 'THEN WE'LL BOTH DIE,' PRONOUNCED ZENGAR, NOW QUITE SERIOUS.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: LABOUR COLONY 206

LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TIME: UNKNOWN

LABOUR COLONY 206

- 'HEY, GET UP, YOU, LAZY BASTARD,' CALLED WARDEN VIAR. 'ENOUGH OF YOUR BITCHING. YOU NEED TO BREAK CRYSTALS, THAT'S WHY THE ALLIANCE SPARED YOUR PATHETIC LIFE!'

THE INTELLIGENT MAN WITH THE LOOK OF A TECHNICIAN RUBBED HIS HANDS, STIFF WITH COLD, AND TRIED TO CONTINUE HIS WORK, BUT AT THAT MOMENT THE GUARD'S ELECTRIC WHIP WRAPPED AROUND HIS NECK, CAUSING HIM A FURIOUS PAIN.

- 'ARE YOU IN A HURRY TO GET SOMEWHERE, MISTER?,' THE GUARD SAID AND BEGAN TO ROUGHLY WHIP HIM.

- 'HEY, THAT'S ENOUGH, VIAR, THIS ONE'S GOING TO DIE, AND IT'S ONLY GOING TO GET US INTO UNNECESSARY FUNERAL CAPSULE EXPENSES,' REMARKED LIHODRON, A LARGE AND STURDY WARDER, A LITTLE DERISIVELY.

- 'I THINK YOU'RE RIGHT,' THE FIRST WARDEN SCRATCHED HIS HEAD, THEN BELLOWED, 'GET BACK TO WORK BEFORE I CHANGE MY MIND!'

THE MAN DRAGGED HIMSELF WITH ANGUISH TO THE QUARRY, WHERE, WITH SWEAT ON HIS BROW, THE PRISONERS BROKE THE INCREDIBLY HARD ZEGANDARIAN CRYSTALS THAT WERE NEEDED IN PRACTICALLY EVERY ELECTRONICS, BUT ESPECIALLY VALUABLE FOR AVIATION GENERATORS.

HIS GROUP CONSISTED OF THREE PEOPLE. WHILE ONE WAS HAMMERING THE CRYSTAL VEINS, ANOTHER WAS HOLDING THE MAIN



CRYSTAL, AND TWO OTHERS WERE LOADING AND CARRYING THE CART TO A NEARBY ELECTRONIC CONTAINER. CURT LABOR, SOME MIGHT SAY, BUT MORE IMPORTANTLY IN THIS CASE IT HOUSED NOT SOME CRIMINAL PRISONERS OR REPEAT OFFENDERS, BUT THE FLOWER OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA - PROMINENT POLITICAL, SCIENTIFIC, ETC. FIGURES WHO WERE INCONVENIENT TO THE ALLIANCE'S CENTRAL AUTHORITY. OR RATHER, THEY WERE FAR MORE CONVENIENT TO BE FORGOTTEN BY THE PEOPLE, AS THEY HAD BECOME AN OBSTACLE TO ONE'S INTERESTS.

- 'THAT BEAST VIAR, IF IT SHOULD ONLY FALL INTO MY HANDS ONE DAY, I'LL KILL IT,' SAID A SHORT AND STOCKY MAN WHO CALLED HIMSELF HERNES.

- 'DON'T DO THAT, JONATHAN, THEY JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING,' MUTTERED THE PHILOSOPHER.

- 'YOU, PHILOSOPHER, HAD BETTER WATCH THE PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISES OF WHAT WAS...SOCRATES,' CALLED THE ENGINEER.

- 'SOCRATES HAS NOT LEFT MANKIND A SINGLE TREATISE,' THE PHILOSOPHER TRIED TO OBJECT, BUT WAS MET WITH A DISAPPROVING LOOK FROM HERNES.

- 'I AM SICK OF THIS DULL CONVICT PRISON,' SIGHED THE ENGINEER HEAVILY.

- 'YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT ONLY THE DEVIL CAN GET US OUT OF HERE,' MURMURED HERNES CAUTIOUSLY AND SOMEWHAT MYSTERIOUSLY.

- 'I'D LIKE THAT DEVIL TO APPEAR FROM SOMEWHERE,' WIPED THE ENGINEER'S BROW.

- 'ENOUGH OF YOUR GRUMBLING,' INTERJECTED THE SAGE, 'THERE'S A TIME AND A PLACE FOR EVERYTHING.'

- 'YES, BUT I DON'T THINK WE'RE IN EITHER PLACE AT ALL,' THE PHILOSOPHER TRIED TO OBJECT FEARFULLY, BUT MEETING HIS COLD GAZE FELL SILENT FOR GOOD.

THEY HAD ALREADY BEEN DIGGING THE ORE FOR FOUR HOURS, AND THERE WERE MORE THAN TEN HOURS TO THE END OF THE WORKING DAY. THEY HAD TONS OF ORE TO PROCESS AND LOAD INTO THE ELECTRONIC SILOS. THE STANDARD WAS INDEFINITE, OR MORE ACCURATELY, THEY HAD TO WORK OUT AS MUCH AS THEY COULD, AND IF ANY FAILED TO HOLD OUT, THEN THE WORST FOLLOWED.

- 'HEY, YOU LAZY BASTARDS, IF YOU DRIVE IT LIKE THAT, YOU WON'T LAST MUCH LONGER HERE,' VIAR CALLED FROM SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE. 'MORE ALIVE. COME ON!'

HEARING THE WARNING SIGNALS AND THE LOOMING DANGER, ALL FOUR FELL SILENT AND WORKED EVEN HARDER. THEY WERE USED TO WORKING AT SUCH A PACE AS THEY HADN'T BEEN HERE SINCE YESTERDAY AND THE WAYS OF THE COLONY WERE VERY WELL KNOWN TO THEM. ANY DISOBEDIENCE WAS PUNISHED IN A PARTICULARLY NASTY WAY, WHICH GENERALLY DEPENDED ON WHAT MOOD THE HEAD WARDEN WAS IN.

MORE THAN ONE OR TWO UNFORTUNATES HAD GASPED UNDER HIS ELECTRIC SHOCK WHIP, FOR HE SOMETIMES LIKED TO TURN UP THE VOLTAGES TO THE MAXIMUM, WATCHING THE VICTIM WRITHE IN AGONY AS IF STRANGLER BY A HUGE SNAKE. AT OTHER TIMES, HIS IMAGINATION, WHICH KNEW NO BOUNDS, WOULD HAVE ACUSTRO (THAT WAS THE NAME OF THE HEAD WARDEN) STRAP HIS VICTIMS TO THE CRYSTALS THEMSELVES AND HEAT THEM RED HOT WITH A PLASMA TORCH UNTIL THE WRETCH WAS ROASTED AND TURNED TO CHARCOAL.

THE HEAD WARDEN WAS A BIT OF A VAIN MAN HIMSELF, HE ALWAYS MADE SURE HE WAS WELL DRESSED, AND DECENTLY COIFFED, AS POINTLESS AS THAT WAS IN THIS WASTELAND. AND APART FROM TORTURING PRISONERS AND HIS APPEARANCE, HE DIDN'T CARE ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE. HE KNEW FULL WELL THAT WHILE THE

ALLIANCE CONSTITUTION TECHNICALLY PLACED THE LABOR COLONY UNDER ITS JURISDICTION, THE REAL POWER IN THE CAMP BELONGED TO HIM AND HIM ALONE, AND THERE WAS NO ONE TO HOLD HIM ACCOUNTABLE IN THIS BACKWATER PLACE.

IN FACT, THE WHOLE DESIGN OF THE COLONY RESEMBLED SOMETHING OF DANTE'S INFERNO, THOUGH THE HAND THAT HAD CREATED IT SCARCELY SUSPECTED THE EXISTENCE OF SUCH A WRITER. THE CRYSTAL QUARRIES STRETCHED OVER AN AREA GREATER THAN 10,000 SCINTILLATERS, MAKING THEM EQUAL TO ALMOST A QUARTER OF THE TERRITORY OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA. AT A DISTANCE OF THREE OR FOUR ZEGANDARIAN MILES WERE THE WARDENS' QUARTERS, LOCATED IN HUGE BEAN-SHAPED PODS, XENTAR, SIMILAR TO THOSE THEY LIVED IN ON THEIR HOME PLANET. THOUGH THEY GUARDED CRIMINALS, AS THE ALLIANCE CALLED THE INTELLECTUALS IMPRISONED HERE, THE WARDENS LIVED QUITE WELL. THE PRISONERS' QUARTERS WERE LOCATED IN THE MOST ORDINARY CAVERNS IN THE GROUND, IN WHICH THE ENTERPRISING WARDERS HAD PLACED ONLY ONE GRAVITY BED AND, TO PREVENT ESCAPES, ONE HYDRON DOOR. AS THE OXYGEN LEVEL ON THE PLANET WAS LOW, EVEN THE PRISONERS WERE ENTITLED TO A SPACESUIT, BUT THIS WAS NOT OUT OF ANY SENSE OF PITY OR CONCERN FOR THEIR LIVES, BUT OUT OF SIMPLE CALCULATION, AFTER ALL, THE DEAD HAD TO BE SHOT INTO SPACE IN A SPACE CAPSULE, AND THIS REPRESENTED SOME EXPENSE, ON THE OTHER HAND THEY COULD NOT LEAVE THE ROTTING CORPSE, AS IT MIGHT CAUSE A CONTAGION AND AN EPIDEMIC TO SWEEP THE WHOLE COLONY.

THE COLONY ITSELF WAS QUITE FAR FROM ZEGANDARIA. EVEN A SPACESHIP TRAVELING AT SUPERLUMINAL SPEED WOULD TAKE MORE THAN TWO ZEGANDARIAN YEARS TO GET HERE FROM ZEGANDARIA, SO ONLY SHIPS THAT COULD WARP THE SPACE OF THE UNIVERSE COULD GET TO THIS INFERNO. AND THOSE WERE ONLY A HANDFUL OF SHIPS FROM THE ALLIANCE MILITARY FLEET, AND ALSO THE CLASS B PRISON SHIPS THAT WERE DESIGNED SOLELY FOR THAT PURPOSE.

^^^

THE NIGHTS IN LABOR COLONY 206 ARE COLD, VERY COLD. AND VERY LONELY. A NEWLY ARRIVED PRISONER WOULD THINK HE WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE AND THE VERY THOUGHT WOULD DRIVE HIM MAD. GRADUALLY SOME GOT USED TO IT AND KEPT THEIR SANITY, ONLY TO FALL VICTIM TO THEIR OWN NIGHTMARES LATER. AND THEY USUALLY HAUNTED THEM AT NIGHT, FOR NO ONE KNEW IF TODAY WOULD BE HIS LAST.

NEEDLESS TO SAY, THE NIGHT, IF NOT LIGHTER, GAVE A PERSON A CHANCE TO BE ALONE WITH THEMSELVES FOR AT LEAST A FEW MINUTES BEFORE BOWING THEIR EYES FOR THE BRIEF SLEEP THAT WAS THEIR DUE IN THIS CURSED PLACE.

IT WAS NEARING THE END OF THE DAY SHIFT (THOUGH DARKNESS HAD LONG SINCE FALLEN) AND OUR ACQUAINTANCES INWARDLY HOPED THEY WOULD LAST UNTIL ITS END.

- 'YOU GUYS BETTER COME OUT STIFF BASTARDS,' VIAR CALLED FROM SOMEWHERE, HIS FACE STRETCHING INTO A SOMEWHAT INTIMIDATING SMILE DESPITE THE DARKNESS. 'YOU MANAGED TO DIG UP NEARLY 10 TERATONS OF CRYSTALS TODAY. HE PAUSED BRIEFLY, AS IF THINKING. BUT THE PRISONERS KNEW THAT THIS DID NOT BODE WELL.'

- 'A REAL ACHIEVEMENT ISN'T IT...LET'S MARCH TO THE CELLS. AND I'M GOING TO REPORT TO THE HEAD WARDEN ABOUT YOU.,' HE GIGGLED AT HIS OWN STRANGE RAMBLINGS AND WALKED AWAY INTO THE DARKNESS.

THE LOWER WARDERS LED THE GROUP DOWN THE DARK PATHS THAT LED TO THE CELLS. THEY HAD SEVERAL MILES TO COVER AFTER 14 HOURS OF HARD LABOUR. AND IF THIS WAS NOT THE SUPREME MOCKERY OF HUMAN EXISTENCE?

HERNS, THE PHILOSOPHER, THE ENGINEER, AND THE SAGE WERE IN THE SECOND COLUMN, WITH ONLY A FEW OTHER PRISONERS IN FRONT OF THEM. ALL WERE INFINITELY DEJECTED, AND DARED NOT

RAISE THEIR HEADS. WHAT WERE THEY GOING TO SEE ANYWAY? STILL THE SAME DARKNESS AND DESOLATION THAT HAD LONG SINCE SETTLED DEEP INTO THEIR SOULS. THEY HAD BEEN SEPARATED FROM THOSE CLOSEST TO THEM SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY WERE NOT COMFORTABLE WITH ANYONE. THE COLUMN JOSTLED PAINFULLY, THE GUARDS ROLLING A CURSE WORD NOW AND THEN AS THEY KEPT PACE. A PITIFUL SIGHT!

EACH TIME THE PRISONERS TOOK THIS ROUTE, THEIR THOUGHTS WERE DIFFERENT. THEY REVOLVED AROUND THE PEOPLE THEY LOVED, THEIR FAMILIES, ON SCIENCE OR ART. RATHER, HOWEVER, THESE WERE GLIMPSES. VAGUE VISIONS THAT FADED WITH TIME AND BLURRED IN THEIR MINDS LIKE A TRANSPARENT FOG. LIKE THE ONE THAT LOOMED EARLY IN THE MORNING OVER THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET ON WHICH THE COLONY WAS LOCATED.

AS OVERWHELMED AS HE WAS BY THE INHUMAN PHYSICAL LABOR, HOWEVER, JONATHAN HEARNS HAD TIME TO CAST AT LEAST ONE FURTIVE GLANCE DURING EACH PASSAGE, FOR THE PRISONERS WERE FORBIDDEN TO LOOK UP OR TO THE SIDE, AND THE GUARDS HAD REPEATEDLY PROVED IT WITH THE BEVELS OF THEIR PLASMA AUTOMATONS. THIS WAS OF COURSE BEFORE, WHILE FRESH RECRUITS CONTINUED TO ARRIVE AT THE COLONY. SOMETHING THAT HAD BEEN HAPPENING LESS AND LESS LATELY.

HERNS' GAZE GREW CASUALLY FIXED FOR NO MORE THAN A SECOND OR TWO, AND HE QUICKLY DUCKED HIS HEAD. HE DIDN'T LIKE WHAT HE SAW AT ALL. HE HAD NOTICED LATELY THAT THE PRISONERS WERE BECOMING MORE AND MORE INDIFFERENT TO EVERYTHING AROUND THEM, THAT THEY WERE LOSING THEIR LIFE, AND THIS ADDED FURTHER BITTERNESS TO HIS ALREADY TORTURED MIND.

SUDDENLY SOMEONE NUDGED HIM ON THE ARM. IT WAS A SUBTLE TOUCH. HEARNS REALIZED IT WAS THE ENGINEER. THAT WAS THE NAME GIVEN TO LEROY ENCOLL, WHO WAS HERE FOR THE TRIVIAL REASON THAT HE HAD WISHED TO MAKE FREE ENERGY AVAILABLE TO HUMANS. THIS, OF COURSE, DIDN'T SIT WELL WITH ANY OF THE ENERGY COMPANIES FROM HIS NATIVE ELOHY. THE MILITARY

TRIBUNAL OF IMGRADON HAD PARDONED HIM FROM A DEATH SENTENCE AT THE LAST MOMENT FOR TWO REASONS. FIRST, TO PUNISH AND BREAK HIM MENTALLY BY SENDING HIM TO EXILE IN THIS DESERT PLACE AND SECOND WITH THE CLEAR KNOWLEDGE THAT DESPITE HIS DISSIDENT VIEWS, HE COULD PROVE USEFUL SOONER OR LATER IN THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR AND PERHAPS EVEN AFTERWARDS.

- 'COME, JONATHAN, IT IS TIME,' HE UTTERED IN A VOICE THAT COULD PERHAPS ONLY BE DETECTED BY THE ACUTE HEARING OF A BLOODHOUND. 'THE BOYS ARE READY. JUST GIVE THE SIGNAL.'

- 'DOESN'T LOOK LIKE IT TO ME. AND YOU HEARD WHAT VIAR SAID. LET'S POSTPONE THE GETAWAY UNTIL TOMORROW NIGHT,' JONATHAN SAID, VERY CALMLY BUT FIRMLY. 'WE'RE TAKING A HUGE RISK IF WE ACT NOW AND IT COULD ALL GO TO HELL.'

- 'YOU KNOW THAT,' AGREED LIROITH, QUITE RELUCTANTLY, BUT STILL RESPECTFULLY, 'BUT IF WE DON'T ACT TOMORROW, I'M GOING TO THROW MYSELF AT THE WARDERS, AND I'LL BE TORN TO PIECES IF I HAVE TO.'

- 'ONLY DON'T DO ANY LAST-MINUTE NONSENSE,' HERNES CUT HIM OFF QUIETLY. 'I DON'T NEED ANOTHER DEAD FRIEND WEIGHING ON MY CONSCIENCE.'

THOSE WORDS SEEMED TO SOBER THE ENGINEER AND HE FELL SILENT.

THE COLUMN WAS ONCE MORE DRAWN SILENTLY INTO NOTHINGNESS.

^^^

THE CHIEF WARDEN HAD REMOVED HIS SPACESUIT AND WAS HAPPILY SIPPING THE DELICIOUS ENSARIAN WINE, ENJOYING HIS FAVORITE MUSIC, 'THE DANCE OF DEATH', WRITTEN OVER THREE

HUNDRED YEARS AGO BY ONE ASTEORN. ALTHOUGH HE WAS A PURE-BLOODED ELOHYN, HE SECRETLY FELT A REAL REVERENCE FOR THE TASTE OF THIS DIVINE AMBROSIA, WHICH DULLED HIS TIRED SENSES AND MADE THE NIGHTS LIGHTER, OR RATHER MORE DREAMLESS. IT WAS A PITY THAT HE HAD VERY LITTLE STOCK LEFT OF THIS PRECIOUS DRINK. FOR WHAT ACUSTRO WANTED WAS NOT TO REMEMBER. WHAT WAS THE POINT IF EACH SUCCEEDING DAY PASSED JUST LIKE THE LAST? ALL HE HAD LEFT WAS TO REVEL IN THE POWER HE HAD OVER HIS CAPTIVES AND THE INHUMAN TORTURE HE SUBJECTED THEM TO DAILY. THE VERY THOUGHT OF IT MADE HIM STOP DRINKING FOR A MOMENT AND ENJOY THE JOYOUS EXCITEMENT THAT OVERCAME HIM.

IT WAS AT THAT MOMENT THAT SENIOR WARDEN VIAR ENTERED THE ROOM AND STOOD SLIGHTLY EMBARRASSED IN THE CORNER, LOOKING LIKE A MAN WHO FELT OUT OF PLACE IN SUCH A SETTING AND MOST IMPORTANTLY LIKE A MAN FEELING THE STRAIN OF FACING A SUPERIOR WHO HAD VIRTUALLY THE FATE OF THE PEOPLE IN THE ENTIRE COLONY AT HIS DISPOSAL.

ACUSTRO DIDN'T EVEN NOTICE HIM. HE WAS LOST IN THOUGHTS OF WHAT NEW TORTURE TO APPLY. IN ORDER TO GET TO KNOW THE CHARACTER OF THE HEAD WARDEN BETTER, IT WAS NECESSARY TO MENTION THAT HE RARELY REPEATED THE SAME TORTURE TWICE. IN TRUTH, THIS BORED HIM TO DEATH AND SOMEHOW DEPRIVED HIM OF THE PERVERSE PLEASURE; ON THE OTHER HAND, HIS EXTREMELY UNPREDICTABLE CHARACTER AND HIS VERY CHANGEABLE MOODS MADE THE PRISONERS SHUDDER AT THE NEW UNKNOWN TO WHICH HE WAS ABOUT TO SUBJECT THEM.

- 'PERMIT ME TO REPORT, SIR,' PRONOUNCED VIAR WITH SOME STAMMERING.

ACUSTRO MOVED ONLY SLIGHTLY, REMAINING HALF-TURNED TOWARDS THE SENIOR WARDER STILL STANDING IN THE CORNER OF THE ROOM, WHERE SEMI-DARKNESS REIGNED.

- 'WHAT'S THE MATTER, VIAR, WHAT NONSENSE ARE YOU BOTHERING ME ABOUT THIS TIME, EH?,' HIS VOICE WAS A MIXTURE OF ANNOYANCE, ARISTOCRATIC CONDESCENSION AND THE COOL INDIFFERENCE OF A BOA READY TO SWALLOW HIS PREY WHOLE AT ANY MOMENT.

- 'FORGIVE ME FOR INTERRUPTING, SIR, BUT...,' VIAR BEGAN TO TRAIL OFF, THOUGH HE HAD REPEATED IN HIS MIND WHAT HE WAS ABOUT TO REPORT.

IN TRUTH, HE TOO, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, HAD A GENUINE HORROR OF ACUSTRO, AND SOMETIMES EVEN WONDERED IF HE WAS A HUMAN LIKE EVERYONE ELSE OR A FREAK STRAIGHT OUT OF HELL. IN FACT, ACUSTRO'S FACE WAS UNUSUALLY BEAUTIFUL AND PALE, LIKE THAT OF A VAMPIRE.

- 'WELL?,' PRONOUNCED ACUSTRO, NOW WITH OBVIOUS ANNOYANCE. 'COULD IT BE THAT THE WORKERS CAN'T FULFILL THE DAILY NORM? IF SO, WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING VIOLATING MY PRIVACY? CAN'T YOU HANDLE THE PROBLEM YOURSELF?'

- 'NO SIR,' VIAR, WHO HAD BEGUN TO QUESTION HIMSELF, BEGAN MORE CONFIDENTLY NOW, 'THEY EVEN OVERFILLED IT SLIGHTLY BY HALF A TERATON.'

- 'LOOK AT YOU!,' EXCLAIMED ACUSTRO, AND HIS FACE LIT UP WITH SOMETHING AKIN TO A SMILE OF SURPRISE, BUT IT WAS RATHER PLAINTIVE. OR AT LEAST THAT WAS HOW THE SENIOR WARDEN PERCEIVED IT.

- 'QUITE TRUE, SIR,' VIAR UTTERED AS IF TO KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.

- 'I THOUGHT THE NORM OF NINE TERATONS A DAY WAS UNWORKABLE, BUT APPARENTLY IT'S NOT,' ACUSTRO PAUSED BRIEFLY. 'AND NOW IT SEEMS WE'LL HAVE NOTHING TO PUNISH THEM FOR, EH?'



VIAR COULD FEEL HIMSELF STARTING TO SWEAT, BUT SOMEHOW SUMMONED THE COURAGE TO CONTINUE.

- NOT QUITE, SIR, I SUSPECT THE PRISONERS ARE PLOTTING SOME SORT OF ESCAPE.

- 'IT CAN'T BE,' ACUSTRO CHUCKLED, BARING HIS EVEN WHITE TEETH, 'AND WHERE, IF I MAY ASK?'

- I WONDER THAT TOO, SIR. SO WE ARE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. EVEN CLASS B SHIPS ARE HARD TO REACH AND THEY COME TO US SO INFREQUENTLY, ONLY TO DROP NEW PRISONERS.

SUDDENLY, ACUSTRO BECAME SERIOUS.

- AND WHO IS THE LEADER OF THIS SO-CALLED REBELLION?

- I DON'T KNOW YET SIR, THE PRISONERS KEEP EVERYTHING HIDDEN, BUT I HAVE SOME SUSPICIONS.

- I DON'T WORK WITH SUSPICIONS, VIAR, I WANT TO KNOW FOR SURE. YES, THE EASIEST THING TO DO IS TO KILL EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM, WIPE OUT THE WHOLE DAMNED COLONY, BUT THEN WHO THE DEVIL WILL SERVE US? THEY'LL TAKE SENDING US TO THE EASTERN FRONT OF ZEGANDARIA. AND THAT WAY AT LEAST WE HAVE AN EXCUSE TO STAND HERE AND VEGETATE BUT STAY ALIVE. AND YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT IN A MASS EXTERMINATION THE DANGER OF PLAGUE ALSO EXISTS.

MENTALLY THE SENIOR WARDEN AGREED WITH THIS REASONING AND NODDED APPROVINGLY. STILL, THE DESTRUCTIVE WRATH OF ACUSTRO HAD NOT FALLEN UPON HIM THIS TIME, BUT WHO COULD BE SURE OF THAT?

- 'LOOK WHAT, VIAR,' ACUSTRO PROMPTED AFTER A MOMENT'S SILENCE, 'YOU RESEARCH THIS JOB. I WANT A RESULT BY TOMORROW MORNING, IF NOT... YOU KNOW WE STILL HAVE A SPARE CAPSULE OR TWO.'

HIS FACE HAD NOW BECOME COMPLETELY EXPRESSIONLESS AND IMPENETRABLE.

- 'AS YOU ORDER, SIR!,' VIAR DID THE HONOURS AND WALKED OUT.

BEHIND HIS EARS THE SAME TUNE CONTINUED TO DRIFT. A MELODY REMINISCENT OF DEATH.

^^^

AFTER THE NOT VERY PLEASANT CONVERSATION WITH THE HEAD WARDEN, VIAR WENT BACK TO HIS CHAMBERS. HE KNEW VERY WELL THAT HE WAS EXPECTED TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM QUICKLY, OR HIS HEAD WOULD BE ON THE CHOPPING BLOCK. THOUGH HE WAS PLAIN-SPOKEN AND RUDE, HE WAS HORRIFIED TO REALIZE THE IRONY OF THIS SUDDEN THOUGHT RUNNING THROUGH HIS MIND. THE COMPARISON WAS QUITE APT, DESPITE THE FACT THAT PEOPLE HAD LONG SINCE STOPPED USING THIS PRIMITIVE METHOD AS A MEANS OF EXECUTION. AS A CHILD HE HAD READ ALMOST NOTHING, AND IN SPITE OF THE VERY RUDIMENTARY LITERACY HE POSSESSED, SOME ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE GREAT FRENCH REVOLUTION APPEARED IN HIS THOUGHT-BLURRED MIND, WHERE THEY GUILLOTINED A CRIMINAL WHOSE HEAD FELL INTO AN EMPTY BASKET, WHILE ALL AROUND THE CROWD CHEERED!

FRANKLY, A MORE DISGUSTING AND HUMILIATING SIGHT THAN THIS HE COULD NOT HAVE IMAGINED. IT WAS TRUE THAT THE TORTURE AND EXECUTIONS ADMINISTERED BY ACUSTRO WERE BEYOND THE LIMITS OF EVEN THE MOST SADISTIC MINDS, BUT VIAR POSSESSED A CERTAIN SENSE OF DIGNITY OF HIS OWN THAT HE FELT WOULD BE VIOLATED BY SUCH AN INGLORIOUS END.

THE WARDEN LOOKED UP AND STARED INTO THE DIGITAL MIRROR. HE WAS ACTUALLY IN THE BATHROOM OF HIS SMALL APARTMENT. ITS AREA DID NOT EXCEED TWO SQUARE METERS BY EARTH STANDARDS. IN THE ADVANCED FUTURE, EVEN ORDINARY PEOPLE HAD SUCH DIGITAL MIRRORS. WITH THEM, A SPECIAL SCANNER READ THE

BUMPS ON THE HUMAN FACE. EVERY BULGE WAS A 1, AND EVERY FLAT SURFACE A 0. THEN THE REFLECTION ITSELF WAS CONSTRUCTED BASED ON A SPECTACULAR SPIRAL EFFECT. ONLY ACUSTRO AND VIAR POSSESSED SUCH LUXURY IN THE ENTIRE COLONY. NO ONE ELSE. AND EVERYONE KNEW IT. BUT THIS TIME, INSTEAD OF ENJOYING THE BEAUTIFUL REFLECTION FORMING, HIS VISION WAS BLURRED AND HE COULD CLEARLY SEE THE TIRED FACE OF A MAN IN HIS FORTIES, AND THIS MAN WAS PALE AS A GHOST.

BEADS OF SWEAT BEGAN TO TRICKLE DOWN THE ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT'S FACE. FOR A MOMENT HE IMAGINED THE SECRET GLOATING OF QUITE A FEW OF HIS SUBORDINATES THAT HE HAD GOTTEN WHAT HE DESERVED, FOR IT COULD NOT BE SAID THAT HE WAS THE BEST WARDEN IN THE HISTORY OF THE COLONY. INSTINCTIVELY, HE FELT HIS BRAIN SHUT DOWN AND SEEMINGLY BEGIN TO REWIND LIKE A BROKEN RECORD.

'IT WOULD BE TOO EASY TO TOSS A NAME AT HIM, NO MATTER WHAT. BUT IF I DON'T GIVE HIM SOME ACCEPTABLE EXPLANATION, HE'LL SAY I'M LOOKING THROUGH MY FINGERS. HE'LL GET MAD IF HE REALIZES HE CAN'T CONTROL THE SITUATION.'

AS HE TALKED TO HIMSELF, HIDDEN FROM EVERYONE, VIAR BECAME MORE AND MORE AWARE OF THE COMPLEXITY OF HIS OWN SITUATION. SOME OF THE OTHERS SUSPECTED HIS SECRET AMBITIONS TO OUST ACUSTRO FROM OFFICE AND TAKE OVER ALL POWER IN THE COLONY, BUT THAT WOULD BE TOO DANGEROUS IN THE SITUATION AT HAND. FIRST OF ALL, EVERYONE WAS AFRAID OF THE HEAD WARDEN, INCLUDING HIMSELF, AND SECONDLY, EVEN IN THIS GOD DAMNED PLACE, TRAITORS, OR RATHER OUTRIGHT TRAITORS, WERE NOT HELD IN HIGH ESTEEM.

THERE WAS ANOTHER IMPORTANT DETAIL THAT MADE THE GAP BETWEEN THE TWO EVEN DEEPER AND INCREASED VIAR'S LOATHING FOR THE SUPREME SOVEREIGN OF THIS HELL - AND THAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE IN CLASSES. HIS PARENTS HAD BEEN SPACE FARMERS ON ZEGANDARIA, AND FRANKLY, AS A YOUNG MAN, VIAR HAD DREAMED OF BECOMING THE MOST CAPABLE FARMER ON THE ENTIRE

PLANET, AND EVEN SOLVING THE PROBLEMS OF FEEDING ITS HUMAN POPULATION. HIS FATHER WAS A STERN MAN, TRYING TO RAISE HIM IN VIRTUES SUCH AS FRUGALITY AND PATIENT, MOLE-LIKE LABOR. BUT THE IDEALS OF HIS YOUTH WERE SOON SHATTERED AS A SECRET MILITARY RECRUITMENT WAS CALLED, OF WHICH HE WAS A MEMBER. WITH DIFFICULTY HE ROSE TO THE RANK OF CAPTAIN. HE HAD PARTICIPATED IN MANY BATTLES. AND ACUSTRO HAD SPRUNG SEEMINGLY OUT OF NOWHERE TO OCCUPY A POSITION HIGHER THAN HIS, FOR HE WAS CONSIDERABLY CLOSER TO THE HIGH COMMAND OF ZEGANDARIA, A JOINT BODY THAT HAD UNITED THE MILITARY COUNCILS OF UBUNDER AND ELOHY IN THE RECENT PAST. AND MOSTLY BECAUSE HE HELD THE RANK OF COLONEL. HOW HE HAD COME BY IT, HOWEVER, EVEN THE GREATEST LOVERS OF SPECULATION COULD ONLY GUESS. BUT VIAR COULD SENSE BY HIS SUPERIOR'S ARISTOCRATIC MANNERS THAT THE TWO WERE NOT OF THE SAME BREED AT ALL, AS THEY PUT IT ON HIS END.

'HOW SORDID LIFE REALLY IS!,' HE THOUGHT INDIGNANTLY. EVEN THE COLONY WARDENS WOULD HAVE LAUGHED ALOUD AT SUCH A THOUGHT, CONSIDERING WHO ITS SOURCE WAS.

'THE PLOT MUST BE UNRAVELED, OR SO ACUSTRO MUST THINK' HE CONTINUED HIS TRAIN OF THOUGHT.

SUDDENLY, VIAR SLAPPED HIMSELF. HOW HAD HE NOT THOUGHT OF IT EARLIER? HE STEPPED INTO THE PRESSURIZATION CHAMBER, WHERE HE SLIPPED ON HIS SPACESUIT.

THE HYDRONIC DOOR CLOSED BEHIND HIM.

HE HAD LEFT HIS CHAMBERS.

^^^

THE PROCEDURE FOR CONFINING A PRISONER TO A CELL WAS MORE THAN ROUTINE, BUT THE GUARDS WERE ALWAYS ON THE LOOKOUT BECAUSE THERE WAS STILL SOME DANGER OF ESCAPES.

MOREOVER, THE CAVERNS THAT SERVED AS CELLS NUMBERED NEARLY FIVE HUNDRED. TO THIS END, THEY PUT SPECIAL MAGNETIC BRACELETS ON EACH PRISONER, WHICH PINNED THEM TO THE GRAVITY BED AND THEN CLOSED THE MASSIVE HYDRON DOOR.

A BUNDLE OF LIGHT.

CLICK. THE HUGE HYDRON DOOR CLOSED.

COMPLETE DARKNESS ENVELOPED THE CELL.

'JUST WHAT I NEED,' THOUGHT JONATHAN HEARNS, LYING PINNED ON THE GRAVITY BED.

LATELY THE GUARDS HAD BECOME PARTICULARLY VIGILANT AND EVEN SOMEWHAT TENSE AND AGGRESSIVE.

'NOW IS REALLY THE TIME FOR ACTION,' THE THOUGHT RAN THROUGH HIS MIND LIKE LIGHTNING.

ACTUALLY, TO SOME BIASED BYSTANDER, REFUSING TO TAKE THE OPPORTUNITY TO ESCAPE WHILE ESCORTING THE PRISONERS FROM THE CRYSTAL QUARRIES TO THE CELLS MIGHT HAVE SEEMED DOWNRIGHT STUPID, BUT JONATHAN KNEW EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS DOING. EVEN IF THEY MANAGED TO INCAPACITATE THE HEAVILY ARMED GUARDS OF THE CONVOY, WHICH NUMBERED ALL IN ALL FIVE PLATOONS, IT WOULDN'T DO THEM ANY GOOD. FOR ONE THING, THE PLANET WAS DESERTED, AND WITHOUT REFUELING THE SPACESUITS WITH FRESH COMPRESSED AIR CAPSULES, THEY WOULD SURELY SUFFOCATE. SECONDLY THEY WOULD STARVE AND DIE OF THIRST, FOR OUTSIDE THE SPECIAL SPACE FARMING FARM WHERE FOUR OR FIVE CROPS WERE GROWN, WHICH WITH THE PITIFUL SEMBLANCE OF BREAD THEY WERE GIVEN MADE UP THEIR ENTIRE MENU, THERE WAS NO OTHER FOOD AT ALL. AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST IN WHAT WAY COULD THEY LEAVE THE PLANET?

THAT WAS THE HARDEST QUESTION, AND ONE THE YOUNG COMPUTER SPECIALIST HAD ASKED HIMSELF MANY TIMES OVER THE LAST THREE YEARS AS HE PLOTTED HOW TO GET OUT OF HERE. HIS

ENTHUSIASM HAD NOT LEFT HIM FOR A MOMENT SINCE THEN, AND HE HAD BEEN SECRETLY WAITING FOR AN OPPORTUNE MOMENT TO PUT IT INTO ACTION.

SUBSEQUENTLY, DURING THE FOUR YEARS HE HAD SPENT IN THE COLONY, HE HAD BECOME ACQUAINTED SUCCESSIVELY WITH THE ENGINEER, THE PHILOSOPHER, WHO BORE THE SONOROUS NAME OF PINDOR AND WAS A LITTLE OLDER THAN THE REST, AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST WITH THE SAGE. BUT HE WAS A BIT OF A WEIRDO, SO THE NAME SUITED HIM PERFECTLY.

JONATHAN'S PLAN WAS MORE THAN SIMPLE, AT LEAST IN THEORY. AS A WORLD-CLASS COMPUTER SPECIALIST, HE HAD A KNACK FOR FINDING HOLES IN THE SYSTEM.

FOR EXAMPLE, WHILE RARE, CLASS B SHIPS WOULD ARRIVE ON THE PLANET TO RESUPPLY IT WITH FRESH SUPPLIES, BUT ON THOSE RUNS THEY ALSO DELIVERED THINGS QUITE USEFUL TO THE COLONY, SUCH AS ASTERON CUTTERS, WHICH WERE USED TO CUT CRYSTALS AND WERE ROUGHLY TEN TIMES HARDER THAN A REGULAR DIAMOND. JONATHAN HAD STOLEN ONE OF THESE, AND AS ODD AS IT LOOKED AT FIRST GLANCE, HE INTENDED TO USE IT TO CUT A HOLE IN THE GLASS HEMISPHERE OF GLOSSANDER THAT COVERED THE CAVERN, STILL PROVIDING VERY MINIMAL LIGHT IN THE PRISONER'S CELL. WITH THE HELP OF THE ENGINEER, WHO WAS ACTUALLY A SPECIALIST IN APPLIED PHYSICS, HE WAS ABLE TO TURN THE GRAVITY BED INTO SOMETHING OF A SORT OF SPRINGBOARD, USING AN ANTI-GRAVITY FIELD CREATED BY A SMALL GENERATOR INVENTED BY LIROUT. ONCE ON THE SURFACE, HE WOULD USE THE COVER OF NIGHT AND KNOWING THE PATROLS' ROUTE WELL TO PUNCH HOLES IN THE HEMISPHERES OF GLOSSANDER AND OTHER PRISONERS.

ONE MIGHT HAVE WONDERED IF THIS PLAN LIMPED TOO MUCH, BUT THE TRUTH WAS THAT JONATHAN HAD THOUGHT OF NOTHING BETTER THAN THIS. THE HYDRON DOORS HAD SOLID SECURITY, WHICH WAS NOT AT ALL TO BE UNDERESTIMATED. THERE WAS AT LEAST ONE GUARD STANDING OUTSIDE EACH OF THE CELLS, ARMED WITH A PLASMA SUBMACHINE GUN AND A CYCLOTRON SYNTHESIZER TO

COMMUNICATE WITH THE OTHERS. ADDITIONALLY, EVERY TWO HOURS A PATROL OF TEN GUARDS MADE THE ROUNDS OF THE SURFACE, CHECKING FOR IRREGULARITIES.

IT WAS BARELY PAST TEN AT NIGHT. JONATHAN KNEW HE HAD LESS THAN TWO HOURS UNTIL THE NEXT PATROL SWEEP, DURING WHICH HE HAD TO ACT.

HE MOVED HIS HAND AND PULLED OUT THE CUTTER THAT HAD BEEN HIDDEN THERE IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE PATROL'S NIGHTLY CHECK OF HIS CELL. WITH GREAT DILIGENCE, HE MANAGED TO GRASP IT BACKWARDS AND BEGAN TO MOVE IT QUITE DEFTLY, RUBBING THE MAGNETIC BRACELETS OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE WITH ZEAL AND FEROCITY, BUT CAUTIOUSLY ENOUGH SO THAT THE SCRAPING WOULD NOT BE CAUGHT BY THE GUARDS.

BUT HOWEVER GREAT THE HARDNESS OF THE TOOL HE WAS USING, IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT THE KEVLARITE YIELDED PARTICULARLY SLOWLY, AND HE WONDERED IF THE TWO HOURS IN QUESTION WOULD BE ENOUGH. AFTER SOME TIME, WHICH IN HIS OPINION EXCEEDED TEN MINUTES, ONE OF HIS HANDS WAS FREED FROM ITS BONDS. HE NOW HAD FAR MORE FREEDOM TO WORK, BUT HE STOPPED FOR A MOMENT AND LISTENED FOR ANY POSSIBLE STIRRING. THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO SOUND EXCEPT HIS OWN RAPID BREATHING AND THE RUSHING OF THE BLOOD IN HIS EARS.

HE REDOUBLED HIS EFFORTS.

THE SECOND CHAIN FELL, THEN THE THIRD, AND FINALLY JONATHAN ROSE FROM THE GRAVITY BED. HE CHECKED CAREFULLY TO MAKE SURE HE HADN'T DONE SOME FATAL DAMAGE TO HIS SUIT.

EVEN THE TINIEST BREACH WOULD MEAN ONLY ONE THING - CERTAIN AND ALMOST INSTANTANEOUS, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, EXTREMELY PAINFUL DEATH. THE PLANET'S LOW GRAVITY WAS CAUSING THE HUMAN BODY TO BURST, TO EXPLODE LIKE A BALLOON. IN PRACTICE, EVEN WITH A RESPIRATOR, WITHOUT A SPACESUIT, ONE COULD NOT

SURVIVE MORE THAN A FEW MINUTES IN THIS EXTREMELY INHOSPITABLE ENVIRONMENT.

FORTUNATELY, THE ELECTRONIC OXYGEN SUPPLY VALVE WAS IN FULL WORKING ORDER AND NOT EVEN THE TINIEST PINHOLE WAS VISIBLE ANYWHERE.

HE BREATHED A SIGH OF RELIEF.

NOW THERE WAS SOMETHING FAR MORE DIFFICULT AND RISKY - TO MANAGE TO REACH THE SPHERE OF GLOSSYANDER AND CUT IT. THIS WAS WHERE THINGS COULD REALLY GO WRONG.

JONATHAN KNEW FULL WELL THAT WHILE LIROUT'S GENIUS WAS UNQUESTIONABLE, THE ANTIGRAVITY FORCES INDUCED BY THE GENERATOR WOULDN'T LAST LONG, AND IF THE GLOSSANDRE DIDN'T GIVE IN, GIVING HIM A CHANCE TO CLIMB TO THE SURFACE, HE'D FALL BACK AND GET SWATTED LIKE A FLY. WHO WOULD WANT SUCH A HUMILIATING END?

ALL THESE THOUGHTS PASSED THROUGH HIS MIND IN LESS THAN A SECOND. HE HAD TO HURRY, BECAUSE IF HE MISSED HIS CHANCE, THE GUARDS WOULD INEVITABLY SEE THE CUT MAGNETIC BRACELETS EARLY IN THE MORNING, AND FROM THEN ON THE ROAD TO EXECUTION WAS TOO SHORT.

HE EXAMINED THE DEVICE. THE GENERATOR WAS A SMALL METAL SPHERE WITH SEVERAL HOLES. DESPITE ITS BIZARRE APPEARANCE, HOWEVER, IT HAD TO BE ADMITTED THAT JONATHAN HAD TOO HIGH HOPES FOR IT. AFTER ALL, IT WAS HIS ONLY PATH TO SALVATION, AND PERHAPS EVEN TO FREEDOM.

HE PLACED HER CAREFULLY ON THE BED THAT HAD UNTIL RECENTLY BEEN HIS PRISON AND SAT ON TOP OF HER. THEN HE STROKED IT WITH HIS HAND. IT HAD NO EFFECT. THE SPHERE STOOD STILL. JONATHAN BEGAN TO CURSE THE BAD LUCK THAT WAS BEGINNING TO MANIFEST ITSELF AT THE MOST SUBLIME MOMENT. THEN HE SUDDENLY REMEMBERED THAT IT WAS NECESSARY FOR THE HOLES ON THE SPHERE TO EXACTLY MATCH THE PLACES ON THE BED WHERE



THE MAGNETIC BRACELETS WERE ATTACHED. A SLIGHT SHIFT OF THE METAL BALL FIXED THAT LITTLE SNAG. JONATHAN STROKED THE SENSOR READER ON IT, SET TO READ ONLY HIS FINGERPRINTS. REPEAT, SHUDDER...

SUDDENLY FOOTSTEPS WERE HEARD, AND HE DUCKED BEHIND THE DOOR, LOWERING HIMSELF IN READINESS FOR AN ATTACK, GRIPPING TIGHTLY THE SMALL METAL BALL THAT WAS NOW HIS ONLY WEAPON.

COMPLETE SILENCE.

ONE COULD GO MAD JUST FROM IT.

SUDDENLY, THE ELECTRONIC HYDRON DOOR OF THE CELL CREAKED OPEN SLIGHTLY.

JONATHAN HEARD THE VOICES OF THE GUARDS.

- 'WHERE THE HELL DID THAT SON OF A BITCH GO?', A FAMILIAR VOICE UTTERED.

- 'LET'S CHECK THE CELL,' SUGGESTED THE OTHER. 'MAYBE HE'S HIDING AROUND SOMEWHERE.'

THE TWO SILHOUETTES CAUTIOUSLY WALKED THROUGH THE DOOR, SHIELDING EACH OTHER. THEY WERE WEARING REINFORCED KEVLAR BODY ARMOUR, COVERED WITH SLABS OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE, AND CLUTCHED THEIR PLASMA WEAPONS TIGHTLY IN THEIR HANDS. JONATHAN DECIDED TO RISK IT. SECONDS REMAINED BEFORE HE WOULD BE DISCOVERED AND SHOT WITHOUT TRIAL OR CONVICTION. HE WAITED A MOMENT, HOLDING HIS BREATH.

THE GUARDS WERE MOVING TOO CAUTIOUSLY, FOR APART FROM THE ALMOST COMPLETE DARKNESS OF THE CELL, ITS AREA SUGGESTED AMPLE NOOKS AND CRANNIES IN WHICH THE FUGITIVE COULD CONCEAL HIMSELF. THEY WERE, AFTER ALL, IN A CAVE, THE ENNOBLEMENT OF WHICH THEY HAD NOT TAKEN MUCH CARE.

ONE OF THEM PAUSED FOR A MOMENT AND TURNED HIS HEAD IN ALL DIRECTIONS, SCANNING THE PERIMETER WITH HIS NIGHT VISION VISOR.

- HEY, LICHODRON, I THINK WE SHOULD CALL FOR BACKUP. WHAT IF THE DOG PLAYS US?

- 'RELAX,' THE OTHER MAN SLITHERED QUIETLY, 'THERE'S ABOUT THIRTY OF THEM WAITING OUTSIDE. IT'S INCONCEIVABLE HE'LL SLIP AWAY.'

HIDDEN IN THE DARKNESS BEHIND A ROCK, JONATHAN LISTENED WITH GREAT SUSPENSE. AFTER INSPECTING ALL THE CORNERS OF THE CELL MOST CAREFULLY, THEY APPROACHED THE GRAVITY BED, WHICH, NOW LEFT EMPTY, SOMEHOW RESEMBLED THE WRECK OF A SUNKEN SHIP, SUGGESTING ALL THE FUTILITY OF THIS ACCURSED PLACE.

- 'THE BRACELETS HAVE BEEN CUT BY THE BASTARD,' THE FIRST VOICE EXCLAIMED. 'I WONDER WITH WHAT?'

- 'ONLY ASTERON CUTTERS ARE CAPABLE OF THAT,' SLITHERED THAT LOW, EVEN VOICE AGAIN, WHICH JONATHAN FOUND SLIGHTLY IRRITATING.

AS THEIR SPACESUITS HAD A SLIGHT ILLUMINATION EMANATING MAINLY FROM THE SENSOR CONTROL BUTTONS AND THE SUIT'S INDICATOR DISPLAY, HE WAS ABLE TO SEE THE FACE OF THE OTHER MAN, WHO HAD REMAINED ANONYMOUS SO TO SPEAK UNTIL NOW. HIS NAME WAS KENDOR. THIS MAN HAD A LIGHTNING-LIKE SLASH ON HIS RIGHT CHEEK, AS HE HAD ONCE BEEN INVOLVED IN PUTTING DOWN A PRISON RIOT, EVEN BEFORE ACUSTRO HAD BECOME WARDEN.

- 'LICHODRON,' KENDOR CALLED SUDDENLY. 'I THINK WE MISSED THAT ANGLE. LET'S HAVE A LOOK AT IT.'

SUDDENLY THE TWO OF THEM HEADED FOR WHERE JONATHAN WAS HIDING. AS MUCH AS HE HAD PREPARED FOR CONTINGENCIES,

HOWEVER, PANIC OVERTOOK HIM. HE FELT HIS ENTIRE BODY CONVULSE AND SEEMED UNABLE TO MOVE ANYWHERE. IT FELT LIKE ANTS WERE CRAWLING ON HIS CEREBRAL CORTEX. EVERYTHING WAS HAPPENING BEFORE HIS EYES LIKE A DREAM.

LIHODRON POINTED THE SPECIAL BATTLE LANTERN ATTACHED TO HIS PLASMA SUBMACHINE GUN AT THE CLIFF AND TOGETHER HE AND KENDOR STEPPED SLOWLY. THEIR FINGERS HAD STRAINED THE SENSOR TRIGGERS TO THE LIMIT AND WERE READY TO PRODUCE A SHOT.

AS THEY APPROACHED, JONATHAN INSTINCTIVELY PRESSED THE SPHERE'S SENSOR READER. HIS MECHANICAL MOVEMENT, MADE IN THAT MOMENT OF PRE-DEATH DANGER, HAD AN EFFECT. SUDDENLY IT STARTED, EMITTING A FAINT BLUISH LIGHT, THERE WAS A SUBTLE POP, THEN A MUFFLED BUT DENSE SOUND. THE WHOLE PHENOMENON RESEMBLED A POWERFUL FIREWORKS DISPLAY THAT ILLUMINATES EVERYTHING FOR A MOMENT, ONLY TO GIVE WAY TO ALL-CONSUMING DARKNESS.

THE TWO GUARDS HAD NO TIME TO REACT AS IT HAPPENED IN LESS THAN A SECOND. THE POWERFUL SHOCKWAVE OUTRIGHT SWEEPED THEM AWAY AND SMASHED THEM INTO THE NEARBY ROCKS. THEIR VISORS SHATTERED INTO A THOUSAND PIECES. THE SURROUNDING VACUUM ENVELOPED THEM. THEY DESPERATELY STRUGGLED FOR BREATH, BUT SOMETHING AKIN TO WHEEZING WAS HEARD. AFTER SEVERAL MINUTES OF AGONY, THE PRESSURE DIFFERENTIAL BURST THEM APART. BLOOD DRIPPED FROM THEIR SUITS, AND THEIR HANDS SLOWLY RELEASED THE PLASMA WEAPONS. THEIR HULKING TORSOS LOOKED LIKE PITIFUL SHELLS DEVOID OF LIFE. NOW THEY WERE JUST CORPSE MATTER WITHOUT A SOUL.

JONATHAN COULDN'T EVEN OPEN HIS MOUTH IN SURPRISE. HIS MIND WAS STILL PARALYZED. IT WAS ALMOST A MINUTE BEFORE HE CAME TO.

HE SUDDENLY REALIZED THAT REINFORCEMENTS WOULD ARRIVE ANY MOMENT, THERE WAS NO TIME TO WASTE. HE WALKED OVER TO

ONE OF THE CORPSES, PULLED OFF HIS PROTECTIVE VEST AND QUICKLY PUT IT ON, THEN GRABBED HIS PLASMA RIFLE. WITH A FLICK OF THE ASTERON CUTTER, HE SENT AWAY THE IDENTIFICATION PATCHES PINNED TO THE KEVLAR PART OF HIS GEAR. HE ALSO TOOK THE SPECIAL NIGHT VISION VISOR AND SECURED IT ONTO THE HELMET OF HIS OWN SPACESUIT. THEN HE PUSHED THE CORPSE WITH THE PATCH OFF BY THE EYES AND SLIGHTLY TO THE SIDE, FOLDING HIS ARM SO IT WOULDN'T SHOW.

NO SOONER HAD HE MANAGED TO DO THIS THAN THE HYDRON DOOR CREAKED OPEN AGAIN.

THE SOLDIERS WHO ENTERED, HOWEVER, SAW A SOLDIER LIKE THEM IN FULL BATTLE GEAR AND WEARING SERGEANT'S INSIGNIA. HE WAS FUSSING OVER HIS BATTLE COMRADES WHO SHOWED NO SIGNS OF LIFE.

^^^

'THOUSANDS OF YEARS OF EVOLUTION HAVE NOT CHANGED HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS AT ALL. IT HAS REMAINED LESS THAN A PEA. WHY ALL THIS VIOLENCE? IS IT JUST BECAUSE MAN IS WEAK BY NATURE AND CANNOT RESIST HIS THIRST FOR BLOOD, OR DOES THE REASON LIE SOMEWHERE MUCH DEEPER?'

PINDOR LIKED TO REASON IN THE CRAMPED CELL, WHERE TIME AND SPACE SEEMED TO BE NON-EXISTENT AND ONE HAD THE FEELING OF BEING IMMERSSED IN A VACUUM. BESIDES, WHAT ELSE WAS THERE FOR THE SQUAT PRISONER BUT TO DISTRACT HIS WORRIES WITH LOGICAL DEDUCTIONS, WHICH HOWEVER CONTRADICTED THE LOGIC OF THE PLACE. AND THE LOGIC HERE WAS SIMPLE AND UNAMBIGUOUS - THE STRONGER WAS ALWAYS RIGHT, NO MATTER WHAT.

OF COURSE, HE ONLY HAD A FEW BRIEF MOMENTS BEFORE HE HAD TO DOZE OFF FOR THE BRIEF FOUR HOURS OF SLEEP THAT WAS DUE TO EVERY PRISONER.

UNLIKE THE OTHER PRISONERS, PINDOR HAD A BIT OF A MISDEMEANOUR, AS HE HAD SINGLE-HANDEDLY SHOT TWO MARAUDERS WHO HAD TRIED TO KIDNAP HIS HOME AND RAPE HIS WIFE. HE WAS AN AVOWED PACIFIST AND A DISTINGUISHED UNIVERSITY PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY. HIS STUDENTS LISTENED EAGERLY AND ENTHUSIASTICALLY, NOT TO SOME DRY AND BANAL SERMONS, BUT TO BRILLIANT AND EVEN SLIGHTLY CRACKPOT COMMENTS ON SENSITIVE AND ALWAYS OPEN TOPICS SUCH AS 'HEGEL'S DIALECTIC' AND 'THE CONTROVERSY OVER UNIVERSALS'. AND THOUGH THESE AREAS OF PHILOSOPHY WERE LONG WELL-TRODDEN, HE ALWAYS MANAGED TO CAPTURE THEIR INTEREST IN AN UNCONVENTIONAL WAY, OFTEN ENTANGLING THEM LIKE DUCKS IN TOW.

- 'PRISON,' HE WOULD BEGIN, 'MAY BE A NOMINAL CONCEPT, THAT IS, IT MAY EXIST ONLY AS A WORD, BUT IT MAY ALSO BE REAL AND HAVE VERY REAL BARS.

- 'WHAT IF IT IS A CONCEPTUAL CONCEPT?,' ONE OF HIS STUDENTS ASKED HIM.

- 'THEN THE GENERAL CONCEPT EXISTS ONLY IN THE MIND OF THE CONCEPT, THAT IS, IN YOUR OWN MIND,' PINDOR CALMLY EXPLAINED THINGS PAINFULLY FAMILIAR TO SCIENCE.

- 'TEACHER, BUT CAN'T ALL THREE TYPES OF CONCEPTS FROM THE EXAMPLE EXIST AT THE SAME TIME AND BE COMBINED INTO ONE,' ASKED A SOMEWHAT NAIVE QUESTION ANOTHER STUDENT.

- 'IT CAN,' SMILED PINDOR, 'BUT IF WE STICK TO THE EXAMPLE, THEN YOU WILL BE THE UNHAPPIEST PERSON IN THE WORLD.'

LYING ON THE GRAVITY BED, PINDOR REALISED THE CRUEL IRONY OF THIS FORGOTTEN EPISODE OF HIS LIFE. NOW, WITH FULL RIGHT, HE COULD CALL HIMSELF THE UNHAPPIEST MAN IN THE WORLD. AND THE REASON WASN'T JUST THAT HE WAS AT AN UNIMAGINABLY GREAT DISTANCE FROM HIS FAMILY-HIS WIFE, LIZ, AND HIS SON, ROYAN. WHAT TORMENTED HIM MOST WAS THAT, IN A WICKED IRONY OF

FATE, HE HAD TRANSGRESSED HIS VIEWS ON NON-VIOLENCE AND HAD SHED BLOOD BECAUSE CIRCUMSTANCES HAD FORCED HIM TO.

'THE WAR HAD ALREADY BEGUN,' HE CONTINUED HIS THOUGHTS- 'THAT NIGHT MY FAMILY AND I THOUGHT OF LEAVING HOME. ENSARIAN HAD BEEN ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED AND WE HAD TO SAVE OURSELVES, FOR IN SUCH A CRISIS THERE WAS NO ONE TO THINK OF US. AND EVEN IF THERE HAD BEEN NO BOMBING AND SHOOTING, THERE WAS NOTHING TO EAT AND WE WOULD INEVITABLY HAVE PERISHED. THERE WASN'T EVEN WATER. FORTUNATELY I WAS FORESIGHTED AND WE HAD A LITTLE BIT OF SUPPLIES FOR ABOUT A DAY-. TWO... THAT NIGHT... EVERYTHING WAS DECIDED EVEN THEN... THEY WERE SENT TO THE HOUSE... THEY WERE SENT ON PURPOSE... THEY WERE NOT THERE BY ACCIDENT... NO... NO... NO... IT'S IMPOSSIBLE... IT'S JUST... IMPOSSIBLE... THEN... THOSE VOICES... THEY WERE JUST WHISPERING TO ME TO KILL THEM... AND MY WIFE WAS UNCONSCIOUS... BUT THEY HADN'T BEEN ABLE TO MOCK HER... SHE HAD JUST FAINTED FROM THE SHOCK OF THE EXPERIENCE. LITTLE ROYAN WAS LOCKED UPSTAIRS IN HIS ROOM SO HE WOULDN'T BOTHER THEM... GOD, WHAT COULD HAVE HAPPENED IF I'D BEEN JUST A FEW MINUTES LATE.'

THE CLERIC FELT THE WEIGHT OF THE MEMORIES PRESS AGAINST THE SIDES OF HIS SKULL LIKE THE CRUEL GRIP OF A VICE. HIS BRAIN SANK INTO A FLOOD OF FIRE. IT LASTED ONLY A FEW SECONDS, THEN, AS THROUGH A FOG, HE BEGAN AGAIN TO STRUGGLE TO CLEAR HIS TORMENTING MEMORIES.

'I WAS JUST ABOUT TO PICK UP THE HYPER-SPEED NIRANGAITER (ANTI-GRAVITY CUSHION MOTOR), REALIZING HOW DANGEROUS IT WAS TO DRIVE SUCH A VEHICLE IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS. MOREOVER, THE CITY LIMITS HAD BEEN QUARANTINED, AND I WAS BEING WATCHED CLOSELY FOR THOSE SPEECHES OF MINE AGAINST THE HYPOCRITICAL FORM OF DEMOCRACY THAT REIGNED IN UBUNDER... I WAS A THORN IN THEIR SIDE... THEY TRIED TO GIVE THEM MORE PUBLICITY...EVEN THOUGH IT WAS DIRECTED AGAINST THEM...TO TURN ME INTO A DISSIDENT...THEY FAILED...WELL,

MAYBE...TO SOME EXTENT...THEY RUINED MY REPUTATION... BUT WE HAD TO MOVE AWAY AT LEAST A LITTLE FROM THE MAIN POINT OF CONFLICT...AND THE NIRANGAITER WAS THE ONLY MEANS OF SALVATION...THEN I HEARD HER VOICE...THAT MOANING...I'LL NEVER FORGET IT...IT BEGGED...IT PLEADED...IT WAS HOPELESSNESS ITSELF...I DUCKED BEHIND THE WALL AND...THEY EXPECTED HER TO BE ALONE...THEY HAD FOLLOWED ME CLOSELY...SURELY THEY WOULD HAVE KILLED HER...BUT...THEY DIDN'T EXPECT THAT, WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN TO THEM...THE PLASMA BLASTER, THAT I KEPT IN THE HANGAR DID A GREAT JOB...FRIED THE DAMN BASTARDS...MORE MORE ACCURATELY I VAPORIZED THEM...THAT WAS THE LAST I SAW OF HER...I WAS TAKEN AWAY...HELD AND INTERROGATED...CHARGED WITH MANSLAUGHTER...THEY HAD CUNNINGLY ENGINEERED THE SITUATION...I HUNG FROM COURT TO COURT...UNTIL THAT DECISION CAME DOWN TO ESTABLISH LABOR COLONY 206...THEN I MET THE BOYS...NOW THEY ARE MY ONLY SUPPORT...IN THIS DAMNED HELL! '

'WHY DID ALL THIS HAVE TO HAPPEN?,' THE PHILOSOPHER MOANED, ALMOST VOICELESS. NOT EVEN A BLOODHOUND WOULD HAVE CAUGHT THE SOUND OF ALL THAT STALE BITTERNESS.

THE SILENCE AND DARKNESS IN THE CELL WERE MURDEROUS. THEY GAVE NO ANSWER TO SO PRIMAL AND SINCERE A QUESTION. AND PINDOR DESPERATELY NEEDED IT, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN HIS LIFE HE DID NOT KNOW THE ANSWER.

'EVERYTHING WILL BE ALL RIGHT IN THE END, IF IT'S NOT ALL RIGHT, THEN IT'S NOT THE END.'

UNKNOWN AUTHOR

^^^

IT FELT LIKE AN ETERNITY HAD PASSED. PINDOR HAD FALLEN INTO OBLIVION. HE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW IF HE WAS AWAKE OR DREAMING. IF THIS WAS TRULY A DREAM, HE'D RATHER NEVER WAKE UP FROM IT AGAIN. SINKING INTO A REVERIE, HE SAW A LIGHT SIMILAR TO THE ONE USUALLY SAID TO BE 'AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL'.

THERE WAS A SQUEAK. THE MASSIVE HYDRON DOOR OPENED.

- 'COME ON, GET UP, PHILOSOPHER,' CAME THE THROATY VOICE OF A WARDER, 'TIME TO TELL US ABOUT YOURS, HOW WAS IT? 'TRUCULENTS?' HE UTTERED WITH A DISGUSTED STAMMER ON THE LAST SYLLABLE.

- 'SLOW DOWN, LIVELIER, WE HAVEN'T GOT ALL DAY, YEAH,' THE GUARDS WERE SAYING AS THEY REMOVED THE MAGNETIC BRACELETS FROM HIS ARMS.

THEY DID THIS RATHER RUDELY AND SOMEWHAT CLUMSILY, FOR THEY THEMSELVES FELT THE STRAIN OF THE SITUATION, BUT THE PHILOSOPHER OFFERED NO RESISTANCE, MOREOVER, HE SEEMED UNABLE TO COME OUT OF THE STUPOR THAT HAD SEIZED HIM AT ALL.

THE INITIATOR OF THIS WHOLE CIRCUS WAS, OF COURSE, VIAR. ACUSTRO HAD TO BE CONVINCED THAT HE WAS IN CONTROL OF THE SITUATION, OR THE CONSEQUENCES FOR EVERYONE COULD PROVE UNPREDICTABLE. AND IN THE 'LANGUAGE OF THE COLONY' THAT MEANT 'FATAL'.

VIAR'S POINT WAS MORE THAN SIMPLE. HIS GOAL WAS TO FRAME A CULPRIT FOR THE ALLEGED ESCAPE PLOT, BUT TO MAKE IT APPEAR BY NO MEANS RANDOM. HE HAD AMPLE INTELLIGENCE, AND KNEW



WITH POSITIVE CERTAINTY THAT THE PRISONERS ACCEPTED PINDOR AS SOMETHING OF THEIR 'SPIRITUAL GUIDE.' BUT HE HAD HATCHED A DEEPER PLAN. NATURALLY, HE DID NOT COUNT ON THAT PLAN ALONE BEING ENOUGH TO CONVINCE ACUSTRO OF ITS RIGHTNESS. ON THE CONTRARY, HE WANTED TO USE THE PHILOSOPHER AS A SCAPEGOAT TO PROVOKE A CORRESPONDING REACTION IN THE OTHER PRISONERS AND PREDISPOSE THEM TO CONFESS EVEN UNREPENTANT SINS IN ORDER TO GET RID OF HIM. WHAT EVEN THEY DIDN'T KNOW, INCLUDING PINDOR HIMSELF, WAS THAT VIAR, AS THE DEPUTY WARDEN OF THE COLONY, HAD SOMETHING OF HIS OWN INTELLIGENCE. IT WORKED FLAWLESSLY, SOME OF ITS OPERATIONS, EVEN ACUSTRO HIMSELF WAS UNAWARE OF. VIAR HAD MANAGED TO GET HIS HANDS ON THE PHILOSOPHER'S FILE AND WAS FULLY AWARE THAT HE WAS THE ONLY PRISONER IN THE COLONY WHO HAD BEEN CONVICTED FOR NON-POLITICAL REASONS. THIS 'MINOR' FACT OF HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY HAD REMAINED HIDDEN FROM THE OTHER PRISONERS. THE ASSISTANT WARDEN PLANNED TO TAKE THIS TRUMP CARD AND, ALLEGEDLY BY ACCIDENT, THROUGH HIS OWN HENCHMEN AMONG THE PRISONERS, TO THROW THEM A 'FLY', THUS HOPING TO DISCREDIT HIM IN THEIR EYES. THAT IS, HE WAS GOING TO 'HIT TWO BIRDS WITH ONE STONE'. FOR THIS HE HAD ONLY A FEW HOURS UNTIL DAWN, OTHERWISE THIS DAWN WOULD BE THE LAST THING HE WOULD SEE IN HIS LIFE. NO WAY DID HE WANT TO END UP IN A BURIAL CAPSULE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DEAD AND SILENT VACUUM OF OPEN SPACE.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S CROSS-EYED LOOK DID NOT FOR A MOMENT UNNERVE HIS EXECUTIONERS, WHO ROUGHLY PICKED HIM UP, LIKE A RAG DOLL, AND DRAGGED HIM FROM THE CELL.

AS THEY PASSED BY LIROITH'S CELL, WHICH WAS ADJACENT TO HIS, PINDOR SEEMED TO REGAIN SOME OF HIS STRENGTH. THE VEIL THAT HAD BEEN BLOCKING HIS VISION FELL FROM HIS EYES FOR A MOMENT, AND WITHOUT FULLY REALIZING WHAT HAD HAPPENED SO FAR, HE ASKED HALF ANGRILY, HALF IN WONDER.

- 'WHERE THE DEVIL ARE YOU TAKING ME?,' THE MAN STAGGERED, STRUGGLING TO FREE HIMSELF FROM THE IRON GRIP, BUT IT PROVED UTTERLY USELESS AND HIS ATTEMPT TO RESIST WAS BROKEN.

- 'YOU'LL BE SHOWING YOUR ENERGY SOON, PHILOSOPHER,' VIAR, WHO WAS WALKING A LITTLE FURTHER BACK, SMILED MOCKINGLY. 'VERY SOON.'

THE LONE GROUP, CONSISTING OF FOUR MEN, HAD TO CROSS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE CAVERNS AND THE XENTARI, WHERE THE WARDERS' DWELLINGS WERE LOCATED. THE STRUCTURES IN QUESTION NUMBERED ABOUT SIXTY, BUT STILL FORMED SOMETHING RESEMBLING A SETTLEMENT OF QUITE RESPECTABLE, FOR A SPACE COLONY, DIMENSIONS. THE GREENISH FUTURISTIC BUILDINGS WERE INDEED AN IMPRESSIVE SIGHT. IN THE BEST-KEPT XENTAR LIVED ACUSTRO.

OF COURSE, IT WASN'T EVERY DAY THAT A PRISONER WAS USHERED INTO A WARDEN'S QUARTERS. TO BE FAIR, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME IT HAD HAPPENED. EVEN THE GUARDS WERE COMPLETELY BAFFLED AS TO WHAT WAS GOING ON. BUT VIAR WAS PLAYING HIS PART BEAUTIFULLY. HE FELT HE HAD THINGS IN HIS OWN HANDS, OR SO HE THOUGHT.

THE GROUP STOOD BENEATH A CURVE OF THE XENTAR ABOUT FOUR METERS ABOVE THE SURFACE. THEY WERE ENVELOPED BY A BEAM OF LIGHT AND THE CHILIRON SUCTION VALVE CREATING ARTIFICIAL GRAVITY PULLED THEM UP.

AFTER PASSING THROUGH THE SPECIAL PRESSURE EQUALIZATION CHAMBER, THEY REMOVED THEIR SPACESUITS. THE HYDRON DOOR OPENED AND ACUSTRO STOOD BEFORE THEM. HIS FACE WAS AS PALE AS A GHOST'S.

- 'PHILOSOPHER, I EXPECT YOU HAVE SOME INTERESTING THINGS TO TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PLOT,' HE HISSED, HIS VOICE SEEMINGLY CALM AND SOFT, BUT WITH A SUBTLE NOTE OF MENACE.

EVEN THE GUARDS COULD SENSE THE TENSE ATMOSPHERE. HONESTLY, IF IT WERE UP TO THEM, THEY WOULD PREFER TO LEAVE, BUT THERE WAS NOWHERE TO MOVE. EVEN THE MERE PRESENCE OF ACUSTRO WAS UNSETTLING AND STRETCHING THEIR NERVES TO THE LIMIT.

THE LIGHT IN THE ROOM WAS DIM, WITH ACUSTRO'S FACE HALF-LIT AND INSCRUTABLE.

- 'LEAVE US,' HE WAVED CASUALLY TO THE GUARDS.

FOR A MOMENT, VIAR FELT AN INNER CONFUSION, AND IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT SOMEONE WAS GRIPPING HIS HEART WITH COLD METAL PINCERS. THE GUARDS SILENTLY STEPPED BACK AND LEFT HIS CHAMBERS. VIAR HESITATED TO LEAVE, AND HAD JUST TAKEN A STEP IN RETREAT WHEN A SLITHER ESCAPED FROM BETWEEN ACUSTRO'S THIN SNAKE LIPS:

- NOT YOU, VIAR.

AT THAT REMARK FROM THE SUPREME SOVEREIGN OF THIS PLACE, THE TENSION THAT HAD SUDDENLY GRIPPED HIM EVAPORATED AND HE REGAINED SOME OF HIS CONFIDENCE.

- 'SO,' ACUSTRO PROMPTED AFTER A BRIEF SILENCE, 'YOU WERE GOING TO ESCAPE, THEN? AND WHO WAS THE INSTIGATOR OF ALL THIS?,' HE CONTINUED, HIS VOICE SEEMING TO COME FROM UNDERGROUND.

THE PHILOSOPHER WAS OBSTINATELY SILENT AND REFUSED TO SPEAK, BUT IT WAS PLAIN TO SEE THAT HE HAD COME OUT OF THE STUPOR WHICH HAD SEIZED HIM ONLY A MOMENT BEFORE. VIAR LOOKED AT HIM IN AMAZEMENT. WHERE HAD SUCH AUDACITY COME FROM IN THIS SIMPLE PRISONER? ACUSTRO GAVE NO SIGN OF IMPATIENCE, BUT ONE COULD GUESS THAT HE WAS NOT PLEASED WITH THE SILENCE OF THE ESTRANGED PARTY. HIS ANGER WAS LIKELY TO ERUPT AT ANY MOMENT, LIKE A TROPICAL STORM.

THERE WAS EVIDENTLY SOME STRANGE CHANGE GOING ON IN THE PHILOSOPHER, SOME INNER STRUGGLE THAT WAS PICKED UP TO SOME EXTENT BY THE OTHERS IN THE ROOM.

- 'YOU TREAT US LIKE DOGS, AND WORSE,' THE PHILOSOPHER BEGAN, 'IS THIS THE DEMOCRACY WE ALL BELIEVED IN SO MUCH? YOU SLAUGHTER US EVERY GODDAMN DAY WITH UNREASONABLE STANDARDS AND EVEN FOR NO REASON. JUST FOR PERSONAL PLEASURE. TO SHOW US THAT YOU HOLD THE POWER.'

- 'YOU'RE RIGHT ABOUT THAT,' ACUSTRO TOSSED IN CASUALLY. 'I DO HOLD THE POWER. AND AS FOR DEMOCRACY - THERE IS NO DEMOCRACY IN THIS CAMP. IN FACT, IT NEVER HAS.,' HE LAUGHED LIGHTLY, BARING HIS SHARP WHITE TEETH. 'BUT YOU'RE NOT SO INNOCENT EITHER, PHILOSOPHER. YOU'VE KILLED TWO PEOPLE. YOU DESERVE TO BE HERE.'

- 'AND I WOULD DO IT AGAIN. AGAINST PEOPLE LIKE YOU, IT'S THE ONLY POSSIBLE REMEDY.,' THE PHILOSOPHER, WHO ONLY A MOMENT AGO HAD STOOD SO MEEKLY AND APATHETICALLY, STARING INTO NOTHINGNESS, STRETCHED HIMSELF.

- 'SO, WHEN THE KNIFE GOES TO THE STAKE, YOU QUICKLY FORGET YOUR PHILOSOPHICAL TREATISES!,' VENTURED VIAR.

ACUSTRO PRETENDED NOT TO NOTICE HIS PRESENCE AND HIS PARTICIPATION IN THE CONVERSATION AT ALL. SHE DIDN'T EVEN BOTHER TO CROSS HIM.

- 'LISTEN, PHILOSOPHER, I HAVE NO TIME TO WASTE, YOU KNOW WHO THE OTHERS ARE. IF YOU BETRAY THEM, IT'S POSSIBLE I MIGHT SPARE YOU. YOU DO HAVE VALUABLE QUALITIES. I MIGHT EVEN MAKE YOU THE COLONY WARDEN, WHO KNOWS?,' DRAWLED ACUSTRO, SEEMINGLY CASUALLY.

VIAR WAS NOW TRULY AMAZED HERE. HIS PLAN WAS DEFINITELY STARTING TO FAIL, EVEN BEFORE HE HAD PROPERLY GOTTEN INTO ACTION.

- 'I AM NOT AN INFORMER,' REPLIED THE PHILOSOPHER SHORTLY.

- 'JUST THINK,' ACUSTRO CONTINUED IN A HONEYED VOICE, BUT VIAR WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT SOMETHING TERRIBLE WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN, 'YOU CAN SEE YOUR FAMILY AGAIN. I CAN TELL YOU WHERE LITTLE ROIAN IS, WHOM YOU MAY THINK IS DEAD. AND YOUR WIFE LIZ - DON'T YOU WANT TO SEE HER IN YOUR ARMS AGAIN?'

'HOW THE HELL DOES HE KNOW ALL THIS?,' WONDERED VIAR, WHO WAS BEGINNING TO SUSPECT HE WAS IN MORTAL DANGER. HE WASN'T FOOLING HIMSELF THAT ACUSTRO WHO NEVER ACTED DIRECTLY BUT WRAPPED HIMSELF LIKE A BOA AROUND HIS VICTIM, BLOWING ON HER SLOWLY AND PAINFULLY, WAS NOW COOKING UP SOME SORT OF SURPRISE FOR HIM.

A THIN TRICKLE OF SWEAT RAN DOWN THE PHILOSOPHER'S FOREHEAD. CONFUSION WAS READ IN HIS EYES. IT WAS AS IF ALL HIS MANHOOD HAD EVAPORATED IN LESS THAN A SECOND. THE BLOW HAD HAD ITS EFFECT.

- 'IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE.,' HE ANSWERED IN AMAZEMENT. 'THESE ARE LIES, VILE MANIPULATIONS. HIS MIND WAS READY TO SCREAM UNDER THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE MEMORY.'

- 'ARE YOUR SO-CALLED FRIENDS WORTH AS MUCH AS YOUR MOST BELOVED PEOPLE?,' ACUSTRO STRUCK HIS FINAL BLOW.

^^^

TODAY WAS A SPECIAL DAY OR NIGHT FOR COLONY 206. DEPENDS ON THE ZEGANDARIAN PERSPECTIVE, AS IT WAS PRACTICALLY PERPETUAL DARKNESS HERE. PINDOR SPENT ALL THIS TIME IN AN ISOLATED CAPSULE. IT WAS SO QUIET INSIDE THAT HE COULD HEAR THE SOUND OF HIS OWN BREATHING. ACUSTRO HAD DETERMINED HIS SENTENCE, WHICH WOULD BE A SIMPLE HANGING AS IN THE DISTANT PAST. OF COURSE, ANY SANE PERSON WOULD QUESTION HOW YOU COULD HANG SOMEONE IN THE MIDDLE OF OPEN SPACE WITH AN

ALMOST COMPLETE LACK OF GRAVITY. WELL, ACCORDING TO ACUSTRO'S DESIGN, IT WAS ENTIRELY POSSIBLE. WHAT'S MORE, HE HAD EAGERLY DETERMINED AND EVEN METHODICALLY TESTED THE EXACT WAY TO ACCOMPLISH THIS TORTURE, WHICH FILLED HIM WITH A THRILL OF EXCITEMENT. POWERFUL MAGNETIC BRACELETS WERE HOOKED TO THE UNFORTUNATE'S LEGS, AND SPECIAL DUAL NANOMAGNETS WOULD CREATE A CONCENTRATED GRAVITATIONAL MICROFIELD THAT WOULD TEAR THE INTRUDER IN TWO AS A SPECIAL COLLAR OF KEVLARITE WAS PLACED AROUND HIS HEAD. THERE WAS NO SHORTAGE OF SYMBOLISM. IN THIS WAY, ACUSTRO WOULD SHOW THEM ONCE MORE THAT HE VIEWED THEM AS DOGS.

THE PRISONERS, LINED UP TO WATCH WHAT WAS TO HAPPEN TO THEIR LEADER, WOULD HAVE BEEN PERFECTLY AWARE OF THE WHOLE RIDICULOUSNESS OF THE THOUGHT OF ESCAPE. HE WAS, AFTER ALL, THE SOUL OF THE PLACE! HE HAD BUILT IT, USING THE NATURAL FEATURES OF THE ENVIRONMENT, TO HIS OWN TASTE. HE HAD CALCULATED EVERY MICROMETER OF THOSE 10,000 SCINTERS. HE'D PUT EXTRA POSTS AT THE SHUTTLE DOCKS AND THE ISOLATED BAYS FOR THE UPPER-CLASS SHIPS, JUST IN CASE. JUST IN CASE THERE WAS SOME RECKLESS DAREDEVIL READY TO ACT RASHLY! STILL, HE HAD SOME VAGUE FEELING, SOME INSTINCT NAGGING AT HIM THAT SOMETHING MIGHT GO WRONG.

PINDOR WAS TO SERVE HIM WELL AS A PRETEXT TO DEAL WITH VIAR AND HIS DASTARDLY PLOTS. BUT HE HAD TO TREAD CAREFULLY. THOUGH HE SEEMED LIKE THE UNDISPUTED MASTER OF THIS COLONY, ACUSTRO WAS WELL AWARE THAT THE OTHER WARDENS UNDER VIAR'S COMMAND COULD SWEEP HIM OFF HIS FEET WITH EASE. BUT HIS ABILITY TO INSPIRE FEAR AND REMAIN UNPREDICTABLE WOULD HAVE COME IN HANDY.

THE PHILOSOPHER WAS EXTRACTED AND HIS HANDS WERE PINNED MOST CAREFULLY. GIVEN THE FACT THAT THE SUITS WERE A COMPLETE NECESSITY, THE JOB TO NAILING HIM DOWN TOOK LONGER THAN EXPECTED.

THE DEATHS OF LIHODRON AND KENDOR WOULD NOT BE FORGOTTEN. THEY DID THEIR DUTY AND DIED HEROICALLY! THE CULPRIT OF ALL THE HEINOUS REBEL ACTIVITY WILL BE SEVERELY PUNISHED!' THE YOUNG WARDEN RECITED WITH WELL-PLAYED PATHOS. AFTER ALL, HE HAD TO SUCK UP TO HIS SUPERIORS, AND A SECOND SUCH OCCASION WOULD HARDLY DO.

- 'CARRY OUT THE SENTENCE IMMEDIATELY,' ORDERED ACUSTRO, LICKING HIS LIPS ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY, FOR IN HIS MIND WAS A CLEAR MEMORY OF PINDOR'S WELL-DEFINED SPIRITUAL SUPERIORITY. THAT LEARNED IMP HAD TO PAY WITH HIS BLOOD!

THE KEVLARITE COLLAR HAD BEGUN TO TIGHTEN AROUND THE UNFORTUNATE'S NECK AND HIS FACE HAD BEGUN TO TURN BLUE.

- 'TURN OFF HIS OXYGEN SUPPLY,' ORDERED VIAR, STANDING NEARBY.

PINDOR WAS BEGINNING TO DROWN, BUT WAS STILL TRYING TO APPEAR STRONG AND STEADFAST TO HIS TORMENTORS. A MOMENT LATER, FOAM BEGAN TO ERUPT FROM HIS MOUTH, SPRAYING THE GLASS OF HIS SUIT. HIS EYES BEGAN TO GLAZE OVER AND HE LOST CONSCIOUSNESS. THE VEINS ALONG HIS TEMPLES BULGED UNDER THE PRESSURE.

- 'I FEEL DEATH IS NEAR...IF THIS IS TO BE MY END, SO BE IT. 'I DESERVED IT...', PINDOR FELL INTO A DELIRIUM CAUSED BY THE LACK OF OXYGEN.

SUDDENLY, THERE WERE NOISES FROM THE TACHYON ENGINES, LIKE GIBBERISH DUE TO THE DISTORTIONS IN SPACE-TIME THEY WERE CAUSING, AND THE ENTIRE HUMAN CROWD WENT INTO A FRENZY. IT WAS AS IF AN INVISIBLE KNIFE WAS CUTTING A THIN, ETHEREAL, ALMOST INVISIBLE SILK, AND THROUGH THIS OPENING IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE THE OUTLINE OF SOME OBJECT OF SOLID MATTER BEGAN TO PROJECT. BEFORE LONG THE HULL OF THE HUGE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE TOOK ON A CLEARER OUTLINE AND BECAME VISIBLE. 'EMZIROU' WAS PREPARING TO ENTER THE ATMOSPHERE.

LATERAL STABILISERS ON THE SECONDARY ION THRUSTERS WERE TO ENSURE A SMOOTH VERTICAL DESCENT BEFORE LANDING IN SPECIALLY ADAPTED BAYS FOR SHIPS OF THIS CLASS.

ACUSTRO WAS DEFINITELY ANNOYED THAT THE DELIVERIES WERE COMING AT SUCH A SUBLIME MOMENT, BUT HE COULDN'T HAVE PREDICTED IT. NOR WAS THERE ANY WAY TO COVER UP THE EXECUTION. IT WASN'T THAT HE WAS ASHAMED, BUT HE HATED OUTSIDERS, BE THEY EVEN HIS OWN SUPPLIERS, BEING SO AWARE OF EXACTLY WHAT WAS GOING ON IN THE COLONY. SO HE DEVISED A FOOLISH BUT DARING PLAN.

HE MADE AN UNAMBIGUOUS GESTURE TO ASSISTANT HEAD WARDEN VIAR TO GO AND MEET THE 'GUESTS', TO PULL THE WOOL OVER THEIR EYES. THIS OF COURSE HE WOULD USE AT A LATER STAGE TO MALIGN HIM AND SHIFT THE RESPONSIBILITY ONTO HIS SHOULDERS. 'BUT ... ALL IN GOOD TIME ... ' ACUSTRO THOUGHT TO HIMSELF.

VIAR TOOK THREE OF HIS MEN AND HEADED FOR THE ISOLATED SECTIONS THAT WERE NOT FAR FROM THE EXECUTION SITE. JUST IN CASE, HE ISSUED ORDERS FOR FULL COMBAT READINESS. HE WAS AWARE THAT HE HAD NO CHOICE TO REFUSE HIS SUPERIOR AND HIS MIND TRIED TO ASSESS THE SITUATION.

THE POSTS SET UP BY ACUSTRO SIGNALLED BY IRENIC LAMPS WHAT WAS THE CORRECT PLACE TO LAND. IN RESPONSE, THE SHUTTLE SENT A BRIEF GLARE TO CONFIRM THAT THEY HAD UNDERSTOOD.

- 'NOW IS OUR MOMENT,' THOUGHT LYREUTH, UTTERING A BARELY PERCEPTIBLE SIGH, 'WE HAVE TO PROCEED WITHOUT YOU, JONATHAN! REST IN PEACE, MY FRIEND!'

THE OTHER PRISONERS WERE ALSO ON TENTERHOOKS AS TO WHAT WAS GOING TO HAPPEN. FOR THE THIRD DAY NOW THERE HAD BEEN NO WORD OR BONE FROM JONATHAN HEARNS. ONE THING WAS CLEAR-HE HAD MANAGED TO ESCAPE. BUT WHETHER HE HAD SURVIVED WAS MERE CONJECTURE. HIS FRIENDS THOUGHT HIM



DEAD. BUT LIROITH FELT THAT PERHAPS HE WAS WAITING FOR A MOMENT LIKE THIS TO JOIN THEIR ATTEMPTED MUTINY.

## CHAPTER NINE: ENSARIAN

LOCATION: UNKNOWN

TIME: UNKNOWN

ABOUT A DOZEN PEOPLE WERE SEATED AROUND THE ROUND MEETING TABLE. THE ATMOSPHERE WAS OBVIOUSLY TENSE. THE ROOM THEY WERE IN WAS NEITHER VERY LARGE NOR VERY SMALL, BUT INFINITELY CURIOUS. ITS WALLS HAD THE APPEARANCE OF A COBWEBBED SILKEN THREAD. IN FACT, THE COVERING WAS MADE OF TOP-SECRET HYON FIBERS, ONE OF THE PRIDES OF THE SCIENTIFIC PROGRESS OF UBUNDER'S SCIENTISTS, WITHOUT PARALLEL. MOREOVER, UPON CLOSER INSPECTION, ANYONE WOULD BE SURPRISED THAT NO DOOR LED OUT OF THE ROOM, AS IF IT HAD NONE AT ALL. THIS WAS THE PURPOSE OF ITS COMPLETE SOUNDPROOFING AND INABILITY TO BE TAPPED EVEN WITH A RHIANDAN TERAFLYTHETTER, WHICH COULD OVERCOME MORE ORDINARY DEFENSES SUCH AS HYDRONIC DOORS, FOR EXAMPLE. THE REASON FOR THESE EXTRAORDINARY SECURITY MEASURES WAS ROOTED IN THE INFINITELY DELICATE SITUATION IN WHICH THE EASTERN PART OF THE PLANET, UBUNDER, FOUND ITSELF. NOTHING SAID IN THIS HALL WAS TO BE HEARD BY OUTSIDE EARS.

ADMIRAL GEOFFREY SPEARS NERVOUSLY TAPPED HIS FINGERS ON THE METALLIC TABLE WITH THE EXTREMELY PRECISE POLISH AND EMBLEM OF THE UBUNDER MILITARY COUNCIL (THE EQUIVALENT OF THE IMGRADON MILITARY TRIBUNAL) AND STRUGGLED WITH HIS TIRED EYESIGHT TO CATCH THE EYES OF THE OTHERS PRESENT AT THIS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT MEETING. IN THIS TOP-SECRET

CHAMBER WERE GATHERED THE PEOPLE WHO WOULD DECIDE THE FATE OF THE POPULATION OF HALF THE PLANET, AND IN BOLDER PREDICTIONS, THE ENTIRE PLANET.

- 'SO YOU'RE SAYING, THEN,' SPEARS INTERJECTED WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, 'THAT THOSE FROM ELOHY DON'T JUST WANT OUR SUPPLIES OF INTERRON FUEL AND KEVLARITE?'

- 'THAT'S RIGHT, JEFF,' RETORTED ELISANDRA DIONNE, UBUNDER'S INTELLIGENCE CHIEF, 'I'M AFRAID THERE'S SOMETHING FAR BIGGER AND UNPLEASANT BEHIND ALL THIS.'

AT HER WORDS, THE PEOPLE IN THE ROOM STIRRED, BARELY NOTICEABLY. BUT IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT THEY WERE ALL ON EDGE AT THE TURN OF EVENTS, AND ESPECIALLY AT THEIR COMPLETE OBSCURITY.

- 'SPEAK PLAINLY, ELISANDRA,' REAR ADMIRAL KENJI NOLSURO URGED HER WITH THE POLITENESS OF HIS ETHNICITY. - 'TELL US EVERYTHING. LET US KNOW.'

- I HAVE SOME INFORMATION THAT POINTS POSITIVELY TO THE EXISTENCE OF A SECRET ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE ELOHYN AND THE GUARRON. AS ILLOGICAL AS IT MAY SEEM AT FIRST GLANCE, THEY ARE ACTING IN TANDEM AGAINST US.

- 'IMPOSSIBLE,' CHEERS WENT UP THROUGHOUT THE HALL.

A STRANGE MIXTURE OF DISBELIEF AND CONFUSION WAS WRITTEN ON MOST FACES. IT WAS AS IF THEY HAD WITNESSED SOME SACRILEGE. THESE WORDS SOUNDED DOWNRIGHT SACRILEGIOUS TO THEM. IT WASN'T LONG, HOWEVER, BEFORE THE AGITATED SPIRITS CALMED DOWN.

- 'BUT STILL QUITE TRUE,' CONTINUED ELIZANDRA WITH A PECULIARLY MYSTERIOUS SMILE. - 'I TOOK CARE TO SEND OUR BEST PILOT ON A RECONNAISSANCE, AND...'

THERE WAS COMPLETE SILENCE IN THE HALL. SURELY EVEN THE FALL OF A PIN COULD BE HEARD.

- '...SO FAR, I STILL HAVEN'T GOTTEN ANY INTEL FROM HIM,' SHE UTTERED AFTER A BRIEF PAUSE.

- HOW COULD SUCH AN ALLIANCE EVEN EXIST? ADMIRAL SPEARS COULDN'T STAND IT. I MEAN, HOW DO THEY EVEN COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER?

- 'APPARENTLY THEY HAVE FOUND A WAY AFTER ALL,' INTERVENED FOR THE FIRST TIME EOHINIS STZADIS. HE WAS PERFORMING DIPLOMATIC FUNCTIONS, AND ALTHOUGH HE WAS FORMALLY A MILITARY SPOKESMAN, HE WAS MORE LIKE A CONFRERE OR MEDIATOR. THAT IS TO SAY, HE ALWAYS LOOKED TO RECONCILE THE PARTIES AND SMOOTH OUT THE CONFLICT.

- 'THEIR SCIENTISTS ARE VERY FAR AHEAD,' ELISANDRA BEGAN AGAIN, 'WE ASSUME THERE ARE MORE PIECES OF THE PUZZLE THAT WE DON'T EVEN SUSPECT. THAT'S WHY I SENT OUR MAN THERE. TO SCOUT OUT THE PLACE.'

- 'AND WHERE, EXACTLY?,' ASKED VICE ADMIRAL NAVARRO GOMEZ.

- 'REALISTICALLY, WHERE THE ENEMY LEAST EXPECTS IT.' REPLIED ELIZANDRA, QUITE UNRUFFLED, 'IN THE VERY HEART OF ELOHY. IMGRADON.'

- AND HOW DO YOU INTEND TO CONTAIN THE SITUATION IN THE CAPITAL - MOST OF THE BUILDINGS HAVE BEEN ALMOST COMPLETELY DESTROYED BY BOMBARDMENT AND PLASMA BLASTS.

- 'WE'LL HOPE FOR SOME KIND OF MIRACLE,' ADMIRAL SPEARS REPLIED A LITTLE THOUGHTFULLY, THEN CUT IN, 'OR RATHER, WE'LL CREATE ONE.'

- 'AND IF WE STILL FAIL?,' VOICED HIS CONCERNS GEN. STOCKTON, IN CHARGE OF ADMINISTRATIVE AFFAIRS AND FOOD SUPPLY FOR THE CIVILIAN POPULATION OF ENSARIAN.

- 'THEN GOD HELP US!', SAID ELISANDRA GRIMLY, PURSING HER LIPS TESTILY AS SHE WATCHED THE REACTION OF HER COLLEAGUES.

THE ATTENDEES GLANCED AT EACH OTHER AND DIRECTED THEIR GAZE TO ADMIRAL SPEARS, WHO HAD NARROWED HIS EYES SLIGHTLY, LOST IN THOUGHT. SUDDENLY, HE BROKE THE SILENCE THAT HAD FALLEN AND CUT IN:

- IN MY OPINION, THERE IS NOTHING TO LINGER OVER. IT'S A MATTER OF DAYS BEFORE THEY REACH US. FROM TOMORROW I AM ORDERING FULL MILITARY MOBILISATION, INCLUDING FOR THE CIVILIAN POPULATION.

ALTHOUGH WITH SOME RELUCTANCE, ALL PRESENT IN THE ROOM NODDED THEIR HEADS IN APPROVAL. IN THIS RESPECT EVERYONE SHARED ONE OPINION.

THE MEETING CAME TO AN END.

THE HALL SANK INTO DARKNESS.

^^^

THERE WAS TRUE CHAOS IN THE STREETS OF ENSARIAN. ABOUT A THIRD OF THE CITY HAD ALREADY COMPLETELY COLLAPSED, AND THE REMAINING TWO-THIRDS WERE BARELY HOLDING ON AND WOULD SOON COLLAPSE AS WELL. THE BEAUTIFUL GOTHIC ELEMENTS IN THE ULTRAMODERN BUILDINGS OF THIS CITY-STATE WOULD BE OBLITERATED FOREVER. THE POPULATION WAS IN COMPLETE SHOCK. ELECTRONIC SCREENS, ACTING AS BILLBOARDS, RELAYED REAL EVENTS OF THE FIGHTING. BUT THERE WAS NO ONE TO MONITOR THEM. THE FEELING OF EMPTINESS WAS SIMPLY OVERWHELMING. TO SOME EXTENT, THIS COULD BE EXPLAINED BY THE MARTIAL LAW AND THE STRICT BAN ON CIVILIANS ON THE STREETS.

PROSTITUTION WAS INDEED A PROBLEM. THERE WERE WEALTHY FAMILIES WHO COULD AFFORD IT AND WHO COULD BUY BASIC COMMODITIES SUCH AS GORENAY HIRAS AND ELENDRANS (EQUIVALENT TO BREAD AND POTATOES) ON THE BLACK MARKET, BUT EVEN THESE WERE BECOMING PROHIBITIVELY EXPENSIVE AND WOULD SOON BE BEYOND THE MEANS OF EVEN THE WEALTHIEST.

THE GLASS SPHERE OF ENDOSIAN THAT WAS THE PRIDE OF THE CITY HAD CRACKS THAT MADE FRESH OXYGEN SCARCE, AND THIS FORCED ANYONE DARING TO GO OUT FOR A 'WALK' TO CARRY AN ASPIRATOR.

THERE WERE RUMOURS OF GUARRONS RAIDS, AND QUITE CLOSE TO THE TOWN. UNDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES PEOPLE WOULD HAVE GREETED THEM WITH DERISION, BUT THESE WERE NOT NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES. NOW ANYTHING SEEMED POSSIBLE TO ANYONE AND NO ONE FELT PROTECTED.

THE MONUMENT TO KING MIDRIEL, THE PATRON OF THE HUMAN RACE ON THIS PLANET, WAS CRACKED AND HAD SPLIT DOWN THE MIDDLE. THIS, MANY BELIEVED, PORTENDED EVIL.

MARK'S FAMILY WAS FORCED TO ENDURE HARDSHIP. THEY DID NOT ENJOY ANY PRIVILEGES, AS DID THE CHIEFS OF THE CITY.

VARIOUS SCHISMATICS BEGAN TO PREACH UTTERLY FOOLISH THINGS AND SOW FURTHER FEAR IN THE PEOPLE. OF COURSE THIS COULD NOT BE DONE IN THE STREET BECAUSE OF MARTIAL LAW. BUT DARK THOUGHTS SET IN AMONG THE PEOPLE AND THEY BEGAN TO ACQUIRE THE INSTINCT OF A HERD OF WILD ANIMALS BEING CHASED BY SOME PARTICULARLY POWERFUL AND RUTHLESS PREDATOR. WHAT ELSE WAS LEFT TO THESE SUFFERING-TORMENTED CREATURES BUT THE HOUR OF SPEEDY DELIVERANCE? WHO COULD HELP THEM? THESE QUESTIONS NO ONE DEIGNED TO ANSWER.

THE LACK OF COMMUNICATION FURTHER EXACERBATED THE WHOLE SITUATION AND BECAME A FERTILE GROUND FOR THE CREATION OF NUMEROUS LEGENDS WITH WHICH CHILDREN WERE LULLED TO SLEEP AT NIGHT.

GUARDS WERE ON DUTY AT THE BORDER POSTS OF THE MEGALOPOLIS, THOUGH MOST OF THEM HAD BEEN TURNED INTO PILES OF RUBBLE AND THIS RATHER DEFEATED THEIR FUNCTION. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE DONE. SO AT LEAST THERE WAS STILL SOME TINY GLIMMER OF HOPE.

IT WAS CLEAR TO EVERYONE THAT THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF THE END.

THE NEWS OF THE SLAUGHTER OF MANY OF THEIR SOLDIERS DID NOT ACT PARTICULARLY ENCOURAGINGLY, BUT EVACUATION WAS INEVITABLE.

IT WAS JUST THAT HIGH COMMAND HADN'T DECIDED TO GIVE THE ORDER FOR IT YET. THE CITY WAS DIVIDED INTO ZONES OF INFLUENCE BETWEEN THE OPPOSING TROOPS AND THE FIGHTING WAS BEING FOUGHT WITH VERY VARIABLE SUCCESS. SOMEONE OR SOMETHING HAD TO CHANGE THE SITUATION, BUT WHAT?

^^^

SINCE THE BOMBING HAD STARTED IN ENSARIAN, THE CIVILIAN POPULATION HAD TO DEPRIVE THEMSELVES OF MANY THINGS. INCLUDING THE LIGHT OF THE ZEGANDARIAN SUN. THE SITUATION WAS GETTING WORSE BY THE DAY, AND ALREADY SOME OF THE MAIN FIGHTING HAD MOVED TO THE VERY APPROACHES OF THE CAPITAL. AND IF A CURFEW HAD EXISTED BEFORE, IT NOW, IN THE FACE OF FULL MILITARY MOBILIZATION, CONSTITUTED A WOEFULLY INADEQUATE PREVENTIVE MEASURE.

UNDER THE PRESCRIPTIONS OF UBUNDER'S MILITARY COUNCIL, ANYONE UNFIT TO FIGHT - AND THIS INCLUDED CHILDREN UNDER FOURTEEN, THE SERIOUSLY ILL, THE DISABLED, THE PARTURIENT, AND THE ELDERLY - WAS TRANSFERRED TO THE SECRET BUNKERS BENEATH THE CITY, BEARING THE SECRET NAME OF THE 'GARDEN OF THE EAST' BECAUSE OF THEIR COMPLETE OXYGEN AUTONOMY FROM THE SURFACE. SPECIAL GREENHOUSES WITH GREEN PLANTS,

VIGILANTLY GUARDED BY 'GHOST WARRIORS' PROVIDED PRACTICALLY ENDLESS REFRESHMENT OF THE AIR, AND ULTRA-MODERN AERATION PLANTS DISTRIBUTED IT TO ALL POINTS OF THE HUGE UNDERGROUND FACILITY.

THE BUNKER ITSELF WAS LOCATED APPROXIMATELY THREE HUNDRED AND FIFTY FEET BELOW THE ZEGANDARIAN SURFACE, SO THAT IT WOULD NOT BE AFFECTED BY THE SHOCKWAVE OF PROTON BOMBS THAT WERE ABOUT TO RAIN DOWN ON THE CITY FROM THE ELOHYN SIDE. BUT THE FORESIGHTED ARCHITECTS OF THIS PECULIAR NOAH'S ARK DID NOT RELY ONLY ON THE THOUSANDS OF TONS OF EARTH AT THE TOP, BUT ALSO ON THE SUPERMASSIVE DOUBLE CONCRETE PROTECTIVE CUSHION, MORE THAN FIVE METERS THICK, WHICH BROUGHT ADDITIONAL SECURITY FOR THE DELIVERANCE OF THE LAST REMNANTS OF THE POPULATION OF THE EASTERN PART OF THE PLANET.

MARK'S FATHER AND MOTHER HAD STILL MANAGED TO GET A PLACE IN THIS LIFEPOD, AND IN A RATHER UNUSUAL WAY.

THEY HAD BEEN AT HOME FOR THE LAST FEW DAYS, WHEN SAID CURFEW WAS STILL IN EFFECT, WORRYING ABOUT THE FACT THAT THEY HADN'T RECEIVED ANY NEWS ABOUT THEIR SON IN MONTHS. KEITH'S FATHER DID GIVE THEM SOME SUPPORT - THOUGH RATHER TOKEN, AS HE HAD RECENTLY RETIRED AND HAD LARGELY LOST HIS FORMER POSITION. STILL, THEY COULD HARDLY HAVE SURVIVED WITHOUT HIS EFFORTS TO SUPPLY THEM WITH PROVISIONS FROM TIME TO TIME. OWING TO THE SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HIMSELF AND ADMIRAL SPEARS, THEIR APPLICATION FOR CONSCRIPTION (A TERM COINED BY THE UBUNDER MILITARY COUNCIL) WAS ACCEPTED, AND WHEN THE SAID PROCEDURE BEGAN, THEIR NAMES WERE AT THE HEAD OF THE MILITARY LISTS.

THE SEALING PROCEDURE WAS NO LESS CURIOUS AND INNOVATIVE. UNLIKE THE AIRTIGHT DOORS OF THE PAST, THE ADVANCED FUTURE USED MANORIUM PLASMA DISKS, WHICH, WHEN CLOSING THE DOORS OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE, LITERALLY 'FUSED' WITH THE METAL INTO A HOMOGENEOUS WHOLE, EVEN MODIFYING THE CRYSTAL

LATTICE OF ITS ATOMS AFTER COMING INTO CONTACT WITH THEM - WHAT'S MORE THE ENTIRE CHEMICAL REACTION TOOK PLACE IN MERE SECONDS. BUT THE FORESIGHTED ARCHITECTS OF THIS PLACE HAD ALSO TAKEN ANOTHER FEATURE OF THE TERRAIN INTO ACCOUNT, FOR THE ZEGARAI MOUNTAINS WERE ONLY ABOUT TWO THOUSAND ZEGANDARIAN MILES AWAY AND CONSTITUTED A ZONE OF SERIOUS SEISMIC ACTIVITY, AND HENCE IT WAS ENTIRELY LOGICAL THAT THE ENTIRE IMMENSE MASS OF THE FACILITY SHOULD REST ON A FIRM FOUNDATION DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF THE PLANET. SOMETHING FAR MORE SOLID THAN LAYERS OF HARDENED HUMILIATED SOIL, WHICH, WHILE POSSESSING SOMEWHAT DIFFERENT PROPERTIES FROM ITS TERRESTRIAL COUNTERPART, WAS CERTAINLY NOT CAPABLE OF ACTING AS A SOLID FOUNDATION. FOR THIS PURPOSE, THEY HAD CONSTRUCTED A SPECIAL DRAINAGE SYSTEM WITH NUMEROUS HOLES, LIKE A HONEYCOMB, PROVIDING ADDITIONAL STABILITY TO THE FACILITY.

THE HUGE UNDERGROUND BASTION, WHICH WAS DESIGNED TO GIVE SHELTER TO A MILLION HUMAN BEINGS, WAS CONNECTED IN A RATHER PECULIAR WAY TO THE FATES OF COMPLETE STRANGERS, EVEN THEIR THOUGHTS. HERE, STRANGE AS IT WAS, A PECULIAR KIND OF SOCIALIST ORDER HAD REIGNED, ONE THAT SUITED THE SITUATION PERFECTLY, SINCE MOST PEOPLE HAD ABANDONED THEIR BELONGINGS AND MONEY ON THE SURFACE DUE TO THE LIMITED TIME THE AUTHORITIES HAD ALLOTTED FOR SEALING THE BUNKER. IN OTHER WORDS, THERE WERE NO CONCEPTS SUCH AS 'MINE' OR 'YOURS' HERE, BUT EVERYTHING WAS 'OURS'. THE MAXIM THAT BECAME THE CREDO FOR THESE UNHAPPY AND TORMENTED CREATURES WAS EVEN IN DERIVING PLEASURE FROM THE SHARING OF THE COMMON GRIEF AND MISERY AMONG ALL THE MEMBERS DURING THE LONG AGONIZING DAYS OF WAITING.

ONE OF THE MOST DEPRESSING FEATURES THAT LOOMED AT FIRST GLANCE WAS THE LACK OF TRUE DAYLIGHT, WHICH COULD NOT REACH EVEN THROUGH THE SINTERED HATCHES DUE TO THE GREAT DEPTH, SO PEOPLE WERE ACCUSTOMED TO THE IRRADIATION LAMPS CASTING A LAZY GREENISH GLARE INTO THE ENDLESS



UNDERGROUND CAVERNS AND LEAVING THEIR FURTHEST CORNERS IN SEMI-DARKNESS.

THE QUADRANTS WERE NINE IN TOTAL, CONNECTED BY AN INTRICATE SYSTEM OF EXTREMELY WELL-FORTIFIED UNDERGROUND TUNNELS THAT GAVE THE WHOLE PLACE AN UTTERLY CONFUSING APPEARANCE TO ANY NEWCOMER. HOWEVER, NO ONE WAS ABLE TO LEAVE A QUADRANT SIMPLY BECAUSE THEY WERE BORED OR WANTED TO CHAT WITH THEIR NEIGHBOR. IF IT WAS ABSOLUTELY NECESSARY THOUGH, SPECIAL GHOST WARRIORS WOULD ACCOMPANY HIM AS HE CROSSED THE QUARANTINE ZONES BETWEEN QUADRANTS. THE UNPLEASANT NEWS WAS THAT IF HE DID WANT TO RETURN, HE WASN'T ALLOWED TO, AS HIS COMPANIONS TREATED HIM AS A TRAITOR TO THEIR QUADRANT.

DAILY LIFE WAS FILLED WITH A LOT OF MINDLESS ACTIVITIES ON THE PART OF THE INHABITANTS, WITH EACH QUADRANT HAVING DEVELOPED ITS OWN PASTIME.

THE FIRST QUADRANT WAS BASICALLY A GAME OF SOME STRANGE MIX OF POKER AND MAHJONG CALLED 'ENTOSIS', WITH EACH PLAYER EARNING THE LOSING PLAYER'S RATION OF FOOD. IT WAS ALSO THE ONLY WAY TO GET EXTRA FOOD, AND IT WAS FOR THIS REASON THAT THIS 'SPORT' WAS PARTICULARLY POPULAR IN THIS QUADRANT. SOME OF THE ENTERTAINMENT WAS MUCH MORE HARMLESS, BUT THERE WERE ALSO ORGANIZED ILLEGAL FIGHTS, SUCH AS IN THE SEVENTH QUADRANT, FROM WHICH THE WINNER EARNED ONLY THE RIGHT TO A RELAXED REGIME WHEN CROSSING THE QUARANTINE ZONE.

MARK'S FATHER AND MOTHER WERE HOUSED IN THE NINTH QUADRANT, WHICH IN TURN WAS ALSO ONE OF THE FURTHEST FROM THE FACILITY. THEY HAD ONLY A SLIGHTLY WIDER MARCHING BED MADE OF PLEXIGLASS, WHICH WAS THE EQUIVALENT OF THE RUBBER USED IN THE PAST. THE QUIZON WRAPS WERE A NATURAL ADDITION AS THEY BELONGED TO THE MILITARY.

IT WAS NECESSARY TO SAY THAT ALTHOUGH THE GHOST WARRIORS PERFORMED THEIR FUNCTION, COMPLETE SAFETY DID NOT EXIST AND EVERYONE WAS LEFT TO FEND FOR HIMSELF. BUT AS LONG AS HE WAS WITHIN HIS QUADRANT, EACH CITIZEN WAS STILL ACUTELY AWARE THAT, IN THEORY AT LEAST, HE COULD WAIT OUT THE EVENTUAL END OF HOSTILITIES ON THE SURFACE.

'THE UNREASONABLE THINK OF ME

AS SOME VISIBLE FORM.

THEY DO NOT KNOW MY ETERNAL

UNMANIFESTED, SINGULAR SELF.'

UNKNOWN AUTHOR

^^^

- 'MOMMY, WILL THEY FIND US,' ROIAN CRIED, SNUGGLED INTO HER LAP. 'I'M SCARED.'

- 'DON'T BE AFRAID, I'M HERE FOR YOU,' HIS MOTHER WHISPERED. 'I WON'T LET ANYTHING HAPPEN TO YOU.'

THE LIMP WOMAN DIDN'T EVEN FULLY BELIEVE HER OWN WORDS, BUT WHAT ELSE WAS THERE FOR HER TO DO. AND SHE, LIKE THE OTHERS, HAD FALLEN INTO A WORLD SHE DIDN'T UNDERSTAND. EVERYTHING WAS HAPPENING WITHOUT ANY LOGIC, AND SO HER ONLY THOUGHT WAS TO FIND A PIECE OF HIGH CALORIE FOOD. NOT EVEN A CRUMB! BUT THE RATIONS WERE DWINDLING EVERY DAY, AND NO FRESH REPLENISHMENTS WERE ARRIVING FROM THE SURFACE. EVEN THE GAME OF ENTOSIS WAS NO LONGER PROVIDING A SUPPLEMENT TO THE RATIONS, BECAUSE PEOPLE WERE WILLING TO BITE THEIR THROATS OUT FOR ANY FOOD. THEY HAD BEEN HERE FOR OVER FOUR WEEKS AND THERE WAS NO PROSPECT OF THE SITUATION

CHANGING FOR THE BETTER. THEY WERE IN THE MYTHICAL SEVENTH QUADRANT WHERE CLANDESTINE FIGHTING WAS TAKING PLACE. IT WAS THE MOST BANDIT-LIKE AREA IN THE GARDENS OF THE EAST, BUT AS BAD LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, THIS WAS WHERE THEY HAD BEEN ASSIGNED.

THE MOTHER STOOD UP, WRAPPED HERSELF IN HER QUIZON SCARF, A GIFT FROM HER HUSBAND. PINDOR CERTAINLY HAD NO OTHER PASSION THAN PHILOSOPHY AND HIS FAMILY, WHICH HE ALWAYS PUT FIRST. THE THOUGHT OF WHEN THEY WERE STILL TOGETHER FLOATED INTO HER MIND. SHE IMAGINED LUSH MEADOWS SPREADING BENEATH THE VAST SPHERE OF ENSARIAN ENDOSIAN. SO MANY SMILING FACES. CHILDREN PLAYING UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYES OF THEIR PARENTS. SO MANY HAPPY MOMENTS. THE RAYS OF THE SUN WERE NOT SO SCORCHING, AS THE ENDOSIAN, UNLIKE A REGULAR GLOSSY, NOT ONLY HELD BACK THE ATMOSPHERE, BUT SHIELDED AGAINST THE RELATIVELY WEAK COSMIC RADIATION OF THE OUTSIDE WORLD. IT ALL SEEMED SO LONG AGO TO HER. AND THIS HAD BEEN THEIR DAILY ROUTINE ONLY A FEW DAYS AGO. SHE TOOK PINDOR'S IMMEDIATE DISAPPEARANCE EXTREMELY HARD, BUT SHE COULD FEEL IN HER HEART THAT HE WAS STILL ALIVE AND HAD NOT FORGOTTEN THEM. AS CRAZY AS IT WAS, SHE EXPECTED TO SEE HIS CLEVER FACE PEEKING AROUND SOME CORNER DOWN HERE. BUT NO MATTER HOW MUCH SHE STARED, THE WALLS AROUND THEM REMAINED AS DARK AND DEAF AS THEIR CRADRANT BRETHREN.

- 'I'LL GO AND LOOK FOR SOMETHING TO EAT,' SHE SAID. 'YOU WAIT FOR ME HERE. OUR LUCK MAY SMILE ON US.'

THE BOY ONLY SHOOK HIS HEAD IN SURPRISE, BUT SAID NOTHING. BUT SO FAR HIS MOTHER HAD NOT BROKEN A PROMISE OF HERS. ONLY THIS TIME DOUBTS CREPT INTO HIS CHILDISH FANCY AS TO WHETHER SHE WOULD REALLY SUCCEED. HE MIGHT PERISH. EVEN DOWN HERE, WHERE THE GHOST WARRIORS KEPT WATCH FOR THE OBSERVANCE OF SOME ORDER.

- 'YOU'LL HAVE TO DO IT ON YOUR OWN UNTIL I GET BACK,' SHE ADDED.

- THE BOY LOOKED AT HER AND HIS EYES FLASHED.

- 'I'M COMING WITH YOU,' HE SAID. 'IT'S TOO DANGEROUS. THERE ARE ALL SORTS OF PEOPLE HERE. I'LL PROTECT YOU.'

- 'NO, YOU MUST STAY HERE,' REPLIED HIS MOTHER, WITH A FIRMNESS IN HER VOICE THAT HE HAD NEVER HEARD BEFORE. I HOPE TO BE BACK AS SOON AS POSSIBLE.

SHE TURNED AND WITHOUT ANSWERING HIM FURTHER POINTED HIM TO THE NEAREST SOLDIER ON POST:

- 'PRIVATE SUMMERS, KEEP AN EYE ON HIM. HE'S THE ONLY ONE I HAVE LEFT,' HER VOICE BARELY REGISTERED A TREMOR.

THE GHOSTLY WARRIOR, THOUGH DRESSED HEAD TO TOE IN FLASHY GEAR AND EQUIPPED WITH STATE-OF-THE-ART COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT, SEEMED TO NOD ONLY IMPERCEPTIBLY. NO ONE NOTICED THAT NOD. BUT EVEN IF HE HAD NOTICED IT HE PROBABLY WOULDN'T HAVE PAID ATTENTION. UNDERNEATH THE GEAR AND THE BROAD NARAREN OF THE ARMOR WAS ANOTHER WOMAN WHO MIGHT HAVE FELT AT LEAST A FLEETING SYMPATHY FOR THE PLEA MADE BY A LONELY AND DEFENSELESS MOTHER.

PRIVATE SUMMERS. PERHAPS THE ONLY FEMALE GHOST WARRIOR IN THIS QUADRANT EARLIER WAS AN AVOWED PACIFIST. BUT ONCE SHE SAW WHERE THE SITUATION WAS HEADED, SHE REALIZED THE ONLY POSSIBLE WAY WAS TO BECOME PART OF THIS ELITE CORPS OF PROTECTORS. SHE HAD ESCAPED HER BROKEN FAMILY WHERE SHE HAD TO ENDURE THE OPPRESSION OF HER STRICT STEPFATHER. OF COURSE IN TIME MANY OF HER COLLEAGUES HAD BEEN REPLACED, SOME HAD DIED, SHE HERSELF DIDN'T KNOW IF THIS DAY WOULD BE HER LAST BUT SHE GAVE HERSELF WHOLEHEARTEDLY EVERY DAY. SHE PATROLLED MOST CAREFULLY AND SCRUPULOUSLY SAW THAT THE ESTABLISHED ORDER WAS OBSERVED.

INSTANCES OF FIGHTS BETWEEN SOME OF THE RESIDENTS WERE NO EXCEPTION. QUITE ROUTINE ONES AT THAT. BUT SHE NIPPED THEM IN THE BUD. SHE WASN'T GOING TO LEAVE CONTROL OF THIS PLACE

TO PURE CHANCE, AS IT WAS THEIR LAST REFUGE. SOMETIMES, THOUGH VERY RARELY, SHE FELT LIKE A ROBOT, DEVOID OF FEELING AND OBLIGED ONLY TO STRICTLY CARRY OUT THE INSTRUCTIONS GIVEN TO HER. AH, SHE WAS A WOMAN AFTER ALL. AND SHE SENSED THAT SOMETHING BAD WAS ABOUT TO HAPPEN.

'THE ARCHIPELAGO IS A WORLD WITHOUT DIPLOMAS, A WORLD WHERE YOU TESTIFY BY SELF-DESCRIPTION.'

SOLZHENITSYN, THE GULAG ARCHIPELAGO

^^^

BEING LEFT ALONE IN THE DARK, ALL ALONE WITH COMPLETE STRANGERS, WAITING FOR THE ONE PERSON WHO COULD TAKE CARE OF YOU IS ACTUALLY NOT AN EASY TASK AT ALL. LITTLE ROIAN WAS TRYING TO BE OBEDIENT AND NOT BREAK HIS MOTHER'S ORDER, BUT HIS CHILDISH CURIOSITY WAS BURNING HIM. THERE WERE SO MANY INTERESTING ACTIVITIES DOWN HERE THAT OCCUPIED MOST OF THE OCCUPANTS' TIME. STAYING AWAY FROM THEM WAS DEFINITELY COSTING HIM EFFORT. PRIVATE SUMMERS, IN BETWEEN HIS PATROL DUTIES AND KEEPING AN EYE ON PUBLIC ORDER, KEPT AN EYE ON HIM, BUT NOT TOO OFTEN SO AS NOT TO DISTURB HIS LITTLE MAN'S SENSE OF FREQUENCY. HE WATCHED HIM WITH ONE EYE, BUT HE COULD CLEARLY SEE THAT THE LITTLE ONE WAS NOT SOME LIL' BOY OR MAMA'S BOY. HE WOULD EASILY TAKE ON THE DUTIES OF A PATROLLING GHOST WARRIOR IF HIS AGE ALLOWED. HIS MOTHER HAD BEEN LINGERING FOR A FEW HOURS NOW, AND THE SON WAS BEGINNING TO WORRY IF SOMETHING HAD HAPPENED TO HER.

ROIAN HAD BEEN WAITING FOR HER FOR TWO WHOLE DAYS, BUT A FEW MINOR INCIDENTS HAD STILL OCCURRED DURING THAT TIME, ONE OF WHICH WAS NOTEWORTHY. STILL, THINGS HADN'T QUITE GOTTEN OUT OF HAND YET, AND HE WAS HOPING TO SEE HER WHEN

HE HEARD TWO MEN TALKING IN THE DARK. THEIR CONVERSATION WAS QUITE ORDINARY, BUT INTERESTING AT THE SAME TIME.

- 'YOU KNOW, MY FRIEND?,' CALLED THE FIRST VOICE, WITH A SLIGHT TREMOR. 'I WAS MARRIED! WHAT TO DO! I HAD NO OTHER CHOICE. BUT ONE THING I SHALL NEVER FORGIVE MYSELF.'

- 'AND WHAT HAPPENED?,' THE VOICE OF THE OTHER STRANGER TREMBLED.

- WHEN SHE DIED, THAT IS, SHORTLY BEFORE SHE DIED, SHE SHARED SOMETHING WITH ME, SOMETHING THAT WAS IMPRINTED DEEP IN MY SOUL. HALF-OPENING HER EYES, SHE SIMPLY MOUTHED, 'YOU'RE NOT THINKING OF ME.' I'M NOT BEING MELODRAMATIC, BUT THEN I BECAME ACUTELY AWARE OF THE CURSED IRONY OF OUR OWN SURVIVAL AND OUR ULTIMATE GOAL OF CREATING OFFSPRING TO WHOM WE CAN JUST CONVENIENTLY PASS ON OUR OWN MISTAKES AND FAILURES. THAT STONE I WILL DRAG TO MY GRAVE. SHE WAS ACTUALLY RIGHT, BUT MAYBE SHE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT SHE WAS TALKING ABOUT. I STILL LOVED HER, THOUGH. OR MAYBE I LOVED MY OWN SURVIVAL, BECAUSE I SAW MY SALVATION IN HER ALONE. SHE WAS MY GUARDIAN ANGEL. BUT THAT ANGEL WAS ALREADY DYING.

- 'YOU'RE RIGHT ...,' HIS COMPANION SUPPORTED HIM, 'BUT CAN WE DO ANYTHING BUT WAIT AND HOPE?'

- NO, THAT IS OUR GREATEST MISTAKE. DEATH MAY OVERTAKE US AT ANY MOMENT. WE MUST LIVE NOW AND AT ONCE. EVEN IF THERE IS AN AFTERLIFE, IT IS CERTAINLY NOT LIKE THIS ONE.

- 'WHAT HAVE YOU BEEN UP TO?,' A VOICE NEARBY CUT THEM OFF. 'IF I'M GOING TO DIE IN THE MORNING, AT LEAST LET ME BE CHEERFUL AND CHEERFUL. DEATH WITH A SMILE IS SOMEHOW MORE PLEASANT PERHAPS.'

- 'NAIVE ROMANTIC,' THE FIRST OF THE TWO INTERLOCUTORS CUT HIM OFF. 'LIFE FORGIVES US NOTHING, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING, AND YOU WANT US NOT TO DISCUSS IT.'

- 'NEVER MIND, TALK TO YOURSELF,' HE SAID HALF-ASLEEP. 'BELIEVE IT OR NOT, IN THE END EVERYONE ENDS UP TIRED, LONELY AND REPULSED AND THEIR DEATH IMPRESSES NO ONE. ALL IN ALL, HIS LIFE WAS PRETTY MEANINGLESS. NO TWO OPINIONS!'

ROYAN DIDN'T HOLD BACK AND INTERVENED.

- AND DO YOU KNOW WHERE MOM IS?

- 'WE HAVEN'T SEEN HER, MY BOY ...,' THE FIRST INTERLOCUTOR PRONOUNCED STRANGELY KINDLY. 'BUT SHE'S CERTAINLY NOT HERE.'

- 'SHE WANTED TO BRING ME SOMETHING TO EAT.,' HE MURMURED TIMIDLY.

HARDENED AS THE MEN WERE, THEY REMAINED SILENT AND DID NOT TELL HIM THAT THEY HAD SEEN HER HANGING HERSELF A LITTLE FURTHER DOWN IN A DARK CORNER. EVEN HERE A MINIMAL AMOUNT OF CONSCIENCE DETERRED THEM FROM DOING SO. HE WOULD NEVER SEE HER. THE LIMP WOMAN HAD LONG SINCE FLOWN OFF TO A BETTER, OR PERHAPS WORSE, WORLD, AS DIFFERENT RELIGIONS HAD DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS ON THE MATTER.

- 'TAKE THIS AS YOUR FIRST BRUSH WITH HARSH REALITY,' ONE OF THE THREE MEN TOSSED IN.

- BUT IT WAS A CONSCIOUS CHOICE AND YOU ARE NOT TO BLAME. ACCEPT IT!

AS IF A SIMPLE DEATH HAD CHANGED EVERYTHING. IN REALITY, THE PLACE HERE WAS NOT THE SAME, FOR IT HAD ALREADY BEEN DEFILED BY THE BASEST THING THE UNIVERSE COULD IMAGINE - SUICIDE. SUICIDE CAUSED BY UTTER HOPELESSNESS. A VERITABLE FEAST OF DEATH. QUANTUM PHYSICS, OF COURSE, WAS OF A DIFFERENT OPINION. IT WASN'T JUST AN END OF LIFE, IT WAS A SIMPLE TRANSFORMATION. FOR MOST ORDINARY PEOPLE, THESE TWO THINGS WERE SOMEHOW CONTRADICTORY. THEY WERE COMPLETELY INCOMPATIBLE. WELL MAYBE IT WASN'T IMPLEMENTED

IN THE BEST POSSIBLE WAY. BUT IT WAS. AND THAT WAS THE THING THAT MATTERED.

- WELL WE'RE NOT YOUR PARENTS. AND YOU KNOW IT NO WORSE THAN WE DO. BUT YOU HAVE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR YOUR OWN ACTIONS. YOU HAVE TO GET YOUR OWN FOOD. YOUR MOTHER'S GONE. WHAT ELSE IS THERE FOR YOU TO DO BUT FIGHT AND SURVIVE?

THE BOY SAID NOTHING, BUT A LARGE TEAR DROPPED FROM HIS EYE AND PATTED HIS CHEEK. HE GUESSED WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO HER. A LUMP SETTLED ON HIS THROAT. IT CLENCHED ITS LITTLE FISTS, BUT QUICKLY RELEASED THEM HELPLESSLY.

THEY WERE GOING TO DIE IN A FEW DAYS ANYWAY DUE TO LACK OF FOOD. THESE OLD MEN WERE JUST PHILOSOPHIZING, OR MAYBE NOT? THE WATER HAD ALSO BEEN FLUSHING FOR A LONG TIME NOW, BUT IT WAS STRANGELY KEPT QUIET ABOUT THAT. IT WASN'T SOMETHING THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN TALKED ABOUT. IT WASN'T MORAL. OR SO HE THOUGHT AT THE TIME.

IT JUST TURNED AND HEADED FOR THE OTHER QUADRANT, WHERE HIS MOTHER HAD HEADED. THE DARKNESS SWALLOWED HIM. HE HAD HIS OWN SURVIVAL TO ATTEND TO.

^^^

- 'WHAT HAVE WE DONE, ELISANDRA?,' SPEARS TURNED TO HER. 'WE MESSED THIS WHOLE MESS UP. US AND NOBODY ELSE.'

- 'IT'S NOT ALL OUR FAULT,' SHE CALLED BACK. 'WE'RE DEFINITELY DOING EVERYTHING WE CAN TO FIGHT OFF THE ATTACKS. WHETHER WE MANAGE TO DO SO IS ANOTHER MATTER!'

- 'WE'VE LOST TOO MANY PEOPLE. 'THE CAPITAL IS IN RUINS,' STOCKTON CALLED BACK. HE WAS NEAR THEM.



IT HAD BEEN ABOUT TWO MONTHS SINCE THEY HAD DEFENDED THE CITY. KENJI HAD BEEN SENT TO TRANSPORT THE CRIMINALS. SO, HE WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULDN'T WITNESS ALL THE BACCHANALIA. HE HAD LEFT THE CAPITAL IN COMPLETE ANONYMITY.

THE FIGHTING HAD BEEN SO FIERCE THAT THEY HAD LEARNED OF THE DEATHS OF NAVARRO GOMEZ AND EOHINIS SZZADIS, WHO HAD PERISHED IN AN EXTREMELY RIDICULOUS MANNER. SOME OF THE DEFENSIVE LINES HAD BEEN BROKEN AND IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY REACHED THE 'GARDENS OF THE EAST'. WHAT WAS EVEN SCARIER WAS THAT THEY HAD TO ADMIT THEIR OWN DEFEAT. THEY HAD TO ADMIT THEY WERE WRONG AND REALIZE IT LOUD AND CLEAR. CLEARLY THEIR CALCULATIONS ABOUT WARFARE WERE NOT VERY ACCURATE.

THE ENEMY HAD MORE ZIRUARXS, AND NOT LEAST WELL-ARMOURED NIRANGA DESTROYERS, AND ENOUGH ESONIUM BOMBS. THE PROTON BOMBS THEY TRIED TO RESPOND WITH WERE NOT ENOUGH FOR THE SIMPLE REASON THAT THEY DID NOT GIVE MUCH PERIMETER PRECISION. THERE WERE GAPS AND HUGE AND VIOLENT EXPLOSIONS.

SPECIAL INTERCEPTORS ACCOUNTED FOR EVERY POSSIBLE DANGER AND FROM THEN ON, THE ZIRUARXS HAD THE FUNCTION OF BURYING THEMSELVES IN THE SAND AND BEING UNDETECTABLE WHILE THE SMALLER COMBAT UNITS TRIED TO FIND BREACHES IN THE DEFENSES AND PENETRATE.

THE DESTROYER-CLASS COMBAT SPEEDERS WOULD DO A PRETTY GOOD JOB TOO. THEY WERE MEANT TO SECURE THE FLANKS OF THE OPPOSING ARMY AND NEUTRALIZE THE DEFENSIVE OUTPOSTS. THEY HAD CAPTURED MOST OF UBUNDER AND WOULD SOON FINISH THEM OFF AS WELL. THERE WAS NO MOVING! THERE WERE TOO MANY WHO VAINLY BELIEVED IN SOME ILLUSORY SALVATION THAT MIGHT NEVER COME. IT WAS A BATTLE OF LIFE AND DEATH.

- 'DO WHAT YOU CAN, ELISANDRA,' SIGHED SPEARS. 'PERHAPS AN OLD AND TIRED ADMIRAL LIKE MYSELF SHOULD HAVE RETIRED AND

SOMEONE MORE WORTHY TAKE OVER HIS DUTIES. MAYBE THIS CITY-STATE DESERVED BETTER. AND MAYBE WE DEFINITELY HAD A CRAPPY STRATEGY. WE ENDED UP ON THE LOSING SIDE. TOO BAD! YOUR GIRL COULD HAVE CHANGED THE OUTCOME OF THINGS! WHO KNOWS?'

- 'DON'T DO THAT, JEFFREY, YOU HAVE A REAL CHANCE TO DO SOMETHING WITH YOUR LIFE. YOU'LL GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS A HERO!' SHE TRIED TO CHEER HIM UP. YOU'RE ONLY FIFTY! YOU HAVE TO FIND THE STRENGTH TO DEFEND THE CITY YOU LOVE SO MUCH. HE GAVE US EVERYTHING WE ARE!

- 'I DON'T THINK SO,' REPLIED SPEARS, ALMOST VOICELESSLY. 'IF WE'RE STILL ALIVE BY THEN. AND THERE'S SOMEONE TO REMEMBER US BY.'

STOCKTON ONLY COUGHED. HE DID WELL TO REMAIN SILENT. HE DIDN'T WANT TO ADD FUEL TO THE FIRE. HE KNEW THERE WAS NO POINT. EVERYTHING WOULD BE RESOLVED IN A MATTER OF HOURS. NOT EVEN MINUTES. HIS HAND CONSULSIVELY REACHED FOR HIS WEAPON. IT HAD TO BE WITHIN HIS REACH. IT HAD TO BE AVAILABLE - JUST IN CASE. AT LEAST HE COULD PRESERVE HIS DIGNITY IN THESE LAST MOMENTS OF HIS LIFE.

SOMETHING UNHEARD OF AND ABNORMAL WAS APPARENT IN THAT MOMENT. FRENZIED, GREEN-SKINNED GUERRILLA WARRIORS POUNCED ON THE ENEMY ARMY. WITH THEIR PRIMITIVE WEAPONS, THEY WOULD HAVE BEEN POWERLESS, BUT WHO KNOWS WHERE THEY WERE EQUIPPED WITH ADVANCED PLASMA RIFLES AND PROTECTIVE NANOSUITS. SOME OF THEM WERE STILL RIDING THEIR HEAVILY ARMED GROANDUS. THEY KNEW NO MERCY AND WERE CRUSHING EVERYTHING IN THEIR PATH.

ALL THREE RUBBED THEIR EYES, THINKING THEY WERE DREAMING. THEY WOULD NEVER ACCEPT THAT SOMEONE WAS JUST DOING SUCH A THING. IT WAS A HELL OF A CRUSH. WHAT WERE THE MOTIVES OF THE MORTAL ENEMIES OF THE HUMAN RACE TO PROTECT THEM. IT DIDN'T MAKE ANY SENSE!

- 'SPEAK ADMIRAL JEFFREY SPEARS TO ALL OUR AVAILABLE FORCES  
- GIVE THEM YOUR SUPPORT IN THEIR INTENTIONS TO HELP US. LET'S  
SWEEP THE ELOHYN SCUM AWAY,' HE SHOUTED.

THE SMALL NUMBER OF TROOPS MASSED IN VARIOUS CORNERS OF  
THE POLIS ENTERED INTO COHESION WITH THEIR UNTIL RECENTLY  
MORTAL ENEMIES. BRUTALLY READY TO DESTROY AND DEFEAT. IN  
THE HOPE OF SOON DELIVERANCE OR DEATH. THOUGH THEY SPOKE  
NO LANGUAGE, THEY FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE. JUST AS PEOPLE WHO  
HAVE A COMMON CAUSE DO. AND BELIEVE IN AN IDEA.

THEY HAD TO BE CAREFUL ABOUT ONE THING THOUGH. THERE WAS  
NO REASON TO RELAX JUST BEFORE THE END. THAT WAS SIMPLY  
UNACCEPTABLE. THEY HAD TO WIN WITH ALL THEIR MIGHT. AND TO  
OVERCOME THE RESISTANCE. INCH BY INCH. MILLIMETER BY  
MILLIMETER.

THE ENEMY LINES BEGAN TO BEND. HE WAS ALMOST DEFEATED. IT  
WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY ROUTED THE REMNANTS  
OF THE ALREADY HALF-BROKEN BUT SLIGHTLY OUTNUMBERED  
ELOHYN ARMY.

- 'YEAH, HEROES, GO FORTH! NO MERCY! FIGHT TO THE LAST DROP  
OF BLOOD!,' THE ADMIRAL ROARED OVER THE RADIO, INSPIRED BY  
THE IDEA OF A POSSIBLE VICTORY.

- 'YOU WILL NOT GIVE UP,' ELIZANDRA JOINED IN. 'THEY ARE NO  
BETTER THAN YOU. FORWARD!'

UBUNDER SEEMED TO BRIGHTEN. THE GREEN HILLS, BLACKENED BY  
THE MANY EXPLOSIONS AND THE RUMBLE OF MACHINE GUN FIRE  
SOMEHOW SHYLY GAVE WAY FROM UNDER THE PILES OF DEAD  
WARRIORS. THERE WAS SMOKE EVERYWHERE, BUT MANY WISHED  
THEY COULD SMELL SOMETHING ELSE. TO SEE IF THEIR BROTHER,  
SISTER, HUSBAND OR COMRADE WAS STILL ALIVE. THAT WAS FAR  
MORE IMPORTANT.

- 'WE CAN'T LET THE CITY PERISH,' STOCKTON CALLED. 'I WILL PERSONALLY GO TO HELP WITH BOTH HANDS. THERE MAY BE SOME STILL ALIVE AMONG THE CORPSES.'

STOCKTON RUSHED OUT OF THE SAFETY OF THE BUNKER. HE TOOK THE HALF-BROKEN ELEVATOR TO REACH THE SURFACE. HE HAD TO DO IT TO WASH HIS CONSCIENCE. HE NEEDED TO BE UP THERE AMONG THE WOUNDED AND THE WRONGED, NOT SAFELY HUDDLED AMONG THE WELL-PROTECTED WALLS UNDERGROUND. HE OWED IT TO THEM. AND A LOT OF IT.

AS HE FLED IN A WAY HE DIDN'T EVEN SUSPECT WAS POSSIBLE, HE BECAME ACUTELY AWARE OF SOMETHING INTERESTING. IT WAS THE BROTHERLY CRIES OF WARRIORS EMBRACING. WAS IT ALL OVER IN JUST A MOMENT? WAS THIS WHOLE STORY GOING TO END JUST LIKE THAT?

WITH FINAL LEAPS, HE OVERCAME THE GHOST WARRIORS' RESISTANCE TO LETTING HIM OUTSIDE WITHOUT A SPECIAL PROTECTIVE SUIT AND WITHOUT GUARDS. HE STILL PUT ON THE SUIT, JUST IN CASE, AND ACCEPTED TWO GHOST WARRIORS TO ACCOMPANY HIM. CLIMBING THE LAST METERS TO THE SURFACE, HOWEVER, HE FELT THE WIND OF CHANGE. THAT SWEET SPRING WIND, BRINGING A LIGHT-HEARTEDNESS. MAKING EVERYTHING POSSIBLE - EVEN LOVE. HE WONDERED WHERE THEY HAD GONE WRONG WITH THEIR TONS OF SERIOUS CALCULATIONS AND WELL THOUGHT OUT MOVES. THEY HAD HELD THE POSITIONS FOR WEEKS. AND THE BATTLE, AND PERHAPS THE WAR, HAD BEEN DECIDED IN A MATTER OF HOURS. THAT WAS THE IMPORTANT THING!

EMERGING FROM THE BUNKER, HE LOOKED AROUND AND SAW THE AFTERMATH OF TOK RUKH MIN'S RELENTLESS ATTACKS, THE BRUTAL GUARRON PSYCHOPATHIC ASSASSIN WHO HAD BROUGHT MANY OF ENSARIAN'S FINEST WARRIORS TO THEIR KNEES. IRONICALLY, THE CHIEFTAIN HIMSELF, LAY NOT FAR FROM WHERE THE BUNKER CONNECTED TO THE SURFACE. HIS WEATHERED FACE STILL SHOWED DEEP WOUNDS INFLICTED BY SOME OF ENSARIAN'S FINEST WARRIORS. THERE WAS A WHOLE PILE OF DEAD BESIDE HIM.

THE REMAINS OF THEIR BODIES WERE SIMPLY A DISGUSTING SIGHT. EVEN FROM BEYOND THE GRAVE, HIS SPIRIT REFUSED TO SURRENDER.

NOT FAR TO THE NORTHEAST, THE RUINS OF THE FRONT APPROACHES TO ENZOK RA, ENSARIAN'S RICHEST DISTRICT, COULD BE SEEN. THERE HAD ONCE BEEN THE COMMERCIAL PART OF THE CITY. ENSARIAN'S WEALTHY INHABITANTS INDULGED IN NOISY REVELRY UNTIL MIDNIGHT, AND SO THIS DISTRICT DID NOT HAVE A PARTICULARLY GOOD REPUTATION. THE BUILDINGS THERE HAD AN EXTRAORDINARILY BIZARRE AND ALMOST SURREAL SHAPE. BUT STILL IT WAS THE FACE, AND THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PART OF THE FACE AT THAT, OF ENSARIAN. NOW IT WAS COVERED IN RUINS AND THICK SMOKE ENVELOPED IT. THE GUARRON WARRIORS HAD SACKED AND BURNED IT, AND MOST LIKELY THE ENTIRE POPULATION HAD BEEN SLAUGHTERED TO DEATH BY THE MERCILESS HUMANOID CREATURES.

FARTHER ON WAS INTOK RUL, THE SECOND LARGEST DISTRICT AND A VERITABLE PARADISE FOR SCHOLARS AND STUDENTS. THERE WERE THE SCIENCE CENTERS AND LABORATORIES. THE GUARRON HAD NOT DARED TO DEMEAN VALUABLE SCIENTIFIC ACHIEVEMENTS AND ARTIFACTS THEY DID NOT UNDERSTAND. IT WAS A GREAT LOSS TO THE ENTIRE ENSARIAN CIVILIZATION THAT WAS IRREPARABLE.

THE SITUATION WAS MOST UNFORTUNATE AT AZAK INTUL, THE OLDEST DISTRICT AND THE CLOSEST TO THE BUNKER. THERE THE GUARRON HAD NOT EVEN CARED TO LOOT BECAUSE OF THE UNSPEAKABLE AND SAVAGE FEROCITY OF THE FIGHTING. IT WAS EVIDENT THAT THEY HAD BEEN FOUGHT WITH VARYING SUCCESS. SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF THIS QUARTER THERE WAS AN ATMOSPHERE OF RESENTMENT AGAINST THE ARISTOCRATS AND THEIR MANNERS, DESPITE THE WORDS OF BROTHERHOOD AND EQUALITY ALREADY MENTIONED. IT WAS HERE THAT THE GUARRONS HAD SUFFERED THEIR GREATEST LOSSES. LITERALLY THE ARTILLERY HAD TRAMPLED THEM LIKE CHOPPED MEAT. IT WAS SIMPLY UNREAL. HERE AND THERE A LASER CUTTER STUCK OUT AT SOME AND

ANOTHER, DRIVEN INTO THE GROUND TO MARK THE END OF ITS OWNER.

AND YET HOPE SEEMED TO HAVE ALREADY WON. THE HOPE OF A NEW LIFE! HE NOW BELIEVED MUCH MORE THAT THE END HAD COME. AND HIS CHEST HEAVED CONTENTEDLY TO INHALE THE COMPRESSED AIR THAT THE SUIT'S SUCTION SYSTEM WAS FEEDING HIM.

NUNDRAG MET HIM ON THE SURFACE, PROUDLY RIDING HIS GROANDUS. BESIDE HIM, HIS BATTLE COMPANIONS DRAGGED BODIES OF THE SLAIN, BUT THIS TIME THEY DID NOT FEED THEM TO THEIR ANIMALS. THEY HAD RESPECT, AND THEY KNEW THEY SHOULDN'T!

- 'WE FOUND OUT ABOUT ELMBAUM'S BETRAYAL. I MYSELF SENT MY BROTHER SECRETLY ON A JOURNEY TO THE NORTHEAST TO FIND OUT THE TRUTH FULLY. INSTEAD OF KILLING EACH OTHER, IT IS HIGH TIME WE FIND THE REAL CULPRIT AND LET HIM GET HIS JUST DESERTS. WE ARE ALSO YOUR BROTHERS BECAUSE WE ARE DESCENDED FROM YOU. THIS WHOLE FABRICATED LEGEND HAS BEEN SHATTERED TO DUST. EVERYTHING WILL NOW FALL INTO PLACE, OR SO I HOPE. MY FATHER IS A CLEVER MAN. HE MAY BE CRUEL AND RUTHLESS. BUT HE IS SMART.,' THE PRINCE SPOKE THROUGH AN INTERPRETER WHO STRUGGLED TO GARBLE HIS WORDS INTO HUMAN SPEECH. IT WAS DEFINITELY AMUSING.

- 'AND WHAT IS YOUR BROTHER REALLY LOOKING FOR?,' STOCKTON ASKED HIM.

- 'SEVA'S ARMOUR!,' WAS THE SHORT REPLY.

- 'SE- WHAT?,' STOCKTON PUZZLED.

- 'SEVA, THE LAST GREAT QUEEN OF AU KAKTIR,' THE PRINCE SAID THROUGH A CHUCKLE. 'IT WAS ACTUALLY A SKELETON THAT MY WARRIORS PLACED THERE. IF HE WON'T LISTEN TO ME, AT LEAST LET HIM LISTEN TO HER. OR READ WHAT'S WRITTEN ON THE NOTE.'

EVEN THOUGH HE DIDN'T FULLY UNDERSTAND STOCKTON, HE COULDN'T HELP BUT AGREE THAT THE GUARRONS DID WANT TO HELP HIM, AND THEY DID.

- 'AND WHEN WILL HE BE BACK?,' ASKED STOCKTON AGAIN. 'IT'S TIME FOR US ALL TO TAKE ON THE MAIN VILLAIN TOGETHER.'

- 'IT WON'T BE EASY. HE HAS LONG SINCE LEFT THESE PARTS.,' THE PRINCE MUTTERED WITH A SIGH. 'WE CAN ONLY WAIT AND HOPE WE'RE ON THE RIGHT TRACK TO CATCH HIM.'

## CHAPTER TEN: RODWELL

RODWELL. IT WAS A PLACE THAT SEEMED TO HAVE SUFFERED SOME TERRIBLE MISFORTUNE, THE EFFECTS OF WHICH THE MOST EXQUISITE PEN AND THE MOST FLOWERY TONGUE WOULD HAVE BEEN UNABLE TO DESCRIBE. THE SENSE OF DESOLATION AND HOPELESSNESS RADIATED FROM EVERYWHERE. THE TRACES OF THE DESTRUCTION WERE EVERYWHERE VISIBLE. PORTABLE COMMUNICATION TOWERS HAD BEEN TORN OUT AND HALF DEMOLISHED, MACHINE-GUN NESTS HAD BEEN TURNED INTO HEAPS OF SLAG, EXPOSED AND RAGGED - WITH MORE HOLES THAN A HONEYCOMB, AND HUGE CRATERS OVER FIVE METRES DEEP YAWNED WHERE SOLDIERS' WARDS WERE SUPPOSED TO BE. HERE AND THERE THE WIND THAT BLEW MADE A NUMBER OF RUBBISH AND DEBRIS ROLL ACROSS THE SURFACE. THE LIFELESS BODIES OF SOLDIERS WITH PRE-DEATH TERROR WRITTEN ON THEIR FACES LAY PROSTRATE AND USELESS TO ANYONE. A VERITABLE MORTUARY. IT WAS AS IF SOMEONE'S EXPERIENCED HAND HAD ATTEMPTED TO NOT JUST DESTROY, BUT OUTRIGHT WIPE THIS HUMAN ABODE FROM THE FACE OF ZEGANDARIA ONCE AND FOR ALL. THIS EFFECTIVELY LEFT UBUNDER'S NORTHERN FRONT ALMOST COMPLETELY DEFENSELESS, AND THE ONLY OBSTACLE THE ELOHIAN FACED WAS

THE REMNANTS OF THE SOUTHERN FRONT THEY WERE CURRENTLY FLEEING! A VERITABLE CATASTROPHE!

SUCH THOUGHTS SWIRLED THROUGH SASIA'S HEAD AS THE SMALL BATTLE SPEEDER FLEW OVER THE REMAINS OF THE BATTLE APPROACHES. HE AND ZENGAR ONE-EYED COULD BARELY FIT IN THE CRAMPED COCKPIT. SASIA MENTALLY THANKED THAT THE UBUNDER'S MILITARY DESIGNERS HAD PROVIDED A SECOND, SPARE SEAT BEHIND THE PILOT.

NEEDLESS TO DESCRIBE THE INHUMAN EFFORT IT HAD COST THEM TO GET OUT OF THE UNDERGROUND TUNNEL AND OUT OF THE BASE AFTER THE GUARRONS HAD COLLAPSED THE HANGARS ALMOST COMPLETELY. THEIR ESCAPE WAS A TRUE MIRACLE.

THEY WERE BOTH VERY AWARE OF THAT FACT.

ALTHOUGH SHE SEEMED SEEMINGLY CALM, IN TRUTH IT HAD TO BE ADMITTED THAT SASIA STILL DIDN'T HAVE FULL CONFIDENCE IN ONE-EYED. DESPITE HER EXCELLENT MILITARY TRAINING AS AN ELITE PILOT, AS SHE STRUGGLED TO KEEP THE BATTLE BATTERED SPEEDER ON COURSE, HER BUILT UP INSTINCT FOR SELF-PRESERVATION MADE HER IMAGINE THE LITTLE TANTURAN MAN, NO MORE THAN SIX FEET TALL, SUDDENLY DIGGING HIS TINY FINGERS INTO HER NECK AND STRANGLING HER TO DEATH. THEN IT WENT DARK BEFORE HER EYES. THEN THE SPEEDER SLOWLY LOSES ALTITUDE, SPIRALS LIKE A BADLY FOLDED PAPER RACKET, AND CRASHES INTO THE GROUND, BURSTING INTO FLAMES THAT ENVELOP IT FROM ALL DIRECTIONS. RECOVERING FROM HER HEAVY IMAGININGS, SASIA SHOOK HER HEAD AND CONCENTRATED ON THE FLIGHT OF THE MACHINE.

HER MISGIVINGS WERE DUE TO A VARIETY OF REASONS, BUT HER GREATEST FEARS WERE DUE TO THE FACT THAT THEY WERE NOW TRULY RUNNING OUT OF OXYGEN. IT WAS A REAL STROKE OF GOOD FORTUNE THAT IN THE SPEEDER COCKPIT, SHE KEPT TWO SPARE COMPRESSED AIR CAPSULES AT ALL TIMES, WHICH WERE VIRTUALLY INTACT DESPITE THE INFERNAL FIRE THAT HAD BROKEN OUT IN THE HANGARS. AT THE MOMENT, THEY WERE THE ONLY REASON THEY



WERE ALIVE. BUT SHE KNEW THAT ONCE THEY RAN OUT, DOOM WAS NOW INEVITABLE. NO AMOUNT OF HEROISM AND LUCK COULD REPLACE THE COMPRESSED OXYGEN THEIR LUNGS WERE GREEDILY GULPING DOWN AS THE LACK OF FRESH ONE WAS MAKING THEM ACCUSTOMED TO IT.

BECAUSE OF RODWELL'S FOGGY WEATHER, SASIA WAS FORCED TO FLY AT AN EXTREMELY LOW ALTITUDE, A FACT THAT STRETCHED HER ALREADY FRAYED NERVES TO THE LIMIT. SASIA DID NOT KNOW THIS REGION WELL. IT WAS TRUE THAT SHE HAD ACCESS TO MILITARY MAPS OF THIS PART OF THE PLANET, BUT SHE HAD NEVER COME THIS CLOSE. WHO KNEW WHAT WAS WAITING FOR THEM DOWN THERE? AND INEVITABLY THEY WOULD HAVE TO LAND, FOR THEIR FUEL WAS NEARLY DEPLETED.

IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD HER THAT SHE WOULD HAVE TO MAKE SUCH A FLIGHT WITH AN ALMOST COMPLETE STRANGER INTO THE VERY HEART OF ONE OF THE MOST MYSTERIOUS AND DANGEROUS PLACES ON THE PLANET, SHE WOULD CERTAINLY HAVE THOUGHT THEM CRAZY. BUT THERE WAS NO TURNING BACK.

- 'DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA WHERE WE'RE SUPPOSED TO BE FLYING?,' SHE SUDDENLY ASKED ONE-EYED, WHO SEEMED TO HAVE FROZEN AND SHE COULDN'T EVEN DETECT HIS PRESENCE.

- 'OF COURSE, MADAM,' HE REPLIED A LITTLE GREASILY. 'UNCLE ZENGAR IS TRUE TO HIS WORD.'

- 'OUR OXYGEN'S ALMOST RUNNING OUT,' SHE STAMMERED SLIGHTLY, SAYING IT WITH AN AWKWARDNESS THAT MADE HERSELF STARTLE.

- 'I KNOW THAT VERY WELL,' ONE-EYED REPLIED CALMLY.

AFTER A SHORT SILENCE HE ADDED:

- THAT'S ANOTHER GUARANTEE THAT YOU'LL KEEP YOUR PROMISE AND NOT TRY TO BLOW MY BRAINS OUT LIKE IN THAT DAMNED TUNNEL.

THE LAST WORDS WERE SPOKEN WITH A SLIGHTLY WRY SMILE, BUT SASIA SEEMED TO DETECT A SUBTLE REPROACH IN THEM.

- 'WHERE ARE WE GOING, ANYWAY?,' SHE COULDN'T STOP HERSELF FROM ASKING.

- 'TO OUR FRIENDS IN RODWELL, OF COURSE,' ONE-EYED REPLIED WITHOUT BATTING AN EYELID.

'HOPE EVERY LEAVE,  
STEPPING INTO THIS HOUR,  
TO HIM ABOVE PRAY,  
HE HAS TURNED AWAY FROM US.'

^^^

SASIA STRUGGLED TO MAKE OUT THE STRANGE INSCRIPTION CARVED INTO ONE OF RODWELL'S ROCKS. BEHIND HER, ZENGAR THE ONE-EYED GASPED IN ANGUISH:

- AND YOU DIDN'T BELIEVE ME. I TOLD YOU IT WAS HERE.

SASIA COULD NOT DENY THAT THIS INSCRIPTION WAS HARDLY PLACED BY ACCIDENT. BUT THEN AGAIN, IT SEEMED ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO HER THAT THERE WERE OTHER HUMAN BEINGS HERE BESIDES THE TWO OF THEM.

- 'WE HAVE NO TIME TO LOSE,' SHE INTERRUPTED HIM, 'WE COULD RUN OUT OF OXYGEN AT ANY MOMENT AND SUFFOCATE.'

- 'FOLLOW ME,' ONE-EYED MUTTERED WITH MILD DISPLEASURE.

THE TWO OF THEM SANK INTO THE DARK CAVE OPENING SET IN THE LOW CLIFF, JUTTING OUT OF THE SAND LIKE A CHILD'S HALF-CURLED

FOOT ON THE BEACH. WHAT WAS SASIA'S ASTONISHMENT WHEN, AFTER ONLY A HUNDRED YARDS, SOMEONE CALLED OUT TO THEM:

- 'STOP! DON'T MOVE OR I'LL SHOOT!,' A SOFT FEMALE SILHOUETTE WITH A DETERMINED EXPRESSION ON HER FACE EMERGED SLOWLY-SLOWLY-FROM THE DARKNESS. SEVERAL MORE MEN ARMED WITH PLASMA SUBMACHINE GUNS SLOWLY WALKED UP BEHIND HIM.

THE TWO COMPANIONS HELD THEIR BREATH IN ANTICIPATION OF THE MOST FRIGHTENING.

- 'MY NAME IS NEOLA,' PRONOUNCED THE STRANGE RED-HAIRED WOMAN, POINTING A SLEEK PLASMA PISTOL AT THE TWO, 'AND YOU HAVE JUST STEPPED INTO THE LAIR OF THE RODWELL PIRATES.'

- 'MY GIRL, IS ALL THIS NECESSARY?,' UTTERED ZENGAR, FULLY AWARE THAT ANY SHARPER MOVEMENT COULD COST HIM HIS LIFE.

ONLY NOW DID SASIA REMEMBER THE STRANGE SOUNDS SHE HAD ENCOUNTERED DURING HER RECONNAISSANCE MISSION. IT HAD CROSSED HER MIND EVEN THEN THAT THE GUARRONS HAD GRUFFER VOICES AND MADE ROUGHER SOUNDS, AND THE NOISES SHE'D PICKED UP HAD SEEMED MORE LIKE INTERFERENCE FROM A MUFFLED RADIO TRANSMISSION. AS THE PILOT OF AN ULTRA-MODERN MILITARY SPEEDER, SHE WAS WELL AWARE THAT HER AIRCRAFT HAD SOPHISTICATED EQUIPMENT TO AUTOMATICALLY DECODE ANY RANDOMLY PICKED UP SIGNAL WITHIN A THREE ZEGANDARIAN MILE RADIUS. SO THAT WAS WHAT THEY WERE! HER THOUGHTS WERE INTERRUPTED BY A QUIET, SHORT CRY:

- UNCLE ZENGAR, IS THAT YOU? HOW COULD YOU STILL BE ALIVE?

THIS UNUSUAL OUTPOURING OF FEELING TOUCHED SASIA. SHE COULD HARDLY IMAGINE THAT THE SHORT MAN WAS CAPABLE OF GAINING THE FAVOR OF ANYONE.

- 'PUT DOWN YOUR WEAPONS, BOYS,' THE REDHEAD COMMANDED, 'THEY'RE FRIENDS.'

SHE TURNED AND WAS ABOUT TO RETURN TO THE DEPTHS OF THE DARK CAVE FROM WHICH SHE HAD CRAWLED, WHEN SHE SUDDENLY ADDED

- 'SEARCH THEM, JUST IN CASE. IN TIMES OF WAR SUCH MEASURES ARE NOT SUPERFLUOUS. DON'T TAKE IT PERSONALLY, UNCLE ZENGAR,' SHE SHOT HIM A LOOK.

THE MEN STAGGERED TO THEIR FEET AND CHECKED THEM MOST CAREFULLY FOR CONCEALED WEAPONS AND LISTENING DEVICES. IN THE SHORT TIME IT TOOK FOR THIS ROUTINE PROCEDURE, SASIA HAD TIME TO CAST A GLANCE AROUND. THE CAVE WAS DEFINITELY MUCH BETTER MAINTAINED THAN THE NARROW HOLE THEY HAD TO PASS THROUGH TO ENTER WOULD SUGGEST.

THE SMALL GROUP FORMED A CORDON AROUND THEM, AND THUS THEY WALKED ANOTHER TWO HUNDRED YARDS OR SO UNTIL THEY FACED ANOTHER OPENING IN THE ROCK. THE NAKED EYE WOULD NOT HAVE NOTICED IT AT ALL - SO UNREMARKABLE WAS IT.

WE ARE IN FOR A DEEP DIVE, MY FRIENDS. GET READY!' SAID NEOLA, WHO LED THE GROUP AND SIMPLY JUMPED INTO THE HOLE WITHOUT FURTHER ADO.

SEEING THEIR CONFUSION, ONE OF THE MEN NUDGED THEM.

- 'NO BIG DEAL. AND SO WAS I THE FIRST TIME. JUST FOLLOW HER. 'DON'T FORGET,' HE ADDED. 'I'M RADSOIL, AND HE HERE,' HE POINTED VAGUELY INTO SPACE, IS CALLED EDOUARD.

^^^

ONCE THEY EMERGED FROM THE OTHER END OF THE SO-CALLED HOLE, SASIA NOTICED THAT THEY WERE IN A RELATIVELY LARGE CAVE, AND IN THE MIDDLE OF IT A GLASS FIRE WAS CRACKLING MERRILY, LIBERALLY DOUSED WITH INTERRON FUEL TO KEEP IT BURNING LONGER.

NEOLA SMILED ENIGMATICALLY AT THEM. SHE LOOKED LIKE A SAMIDDHA HIDDEN IN HER REFUGE, RECEIVING GUESTS. ONLY THESE GUESTS, WERE SEEKING SALVATION FOR THEIR LIVES.

- 'SIT DOWN, WHAT ARE YOU SCARED OF,' SHE JOKED. 'ENDWHITE, THEY MUST BE HUNGRY, GIVE THEM TWO BLOCKS OF HIGH CALORIE PILOT FOOD.'

ACTUALLY, IN A CAVE LIKE THIS THERE WAS NOWHERE FOR A HUMAN TO ACTUALLY SIT, MUCH LESS IF THEY WERE WEARING A SPACESUIT, ALBEIT THE LIGHTWEIGHT PILOT TYPE THEY USED IN THE NAVY. BUT COME ON, THAT WAS THE TALE.

- 'OUR COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLES WILL RUN OUT SOON,' SASIA HASTENED TO ADD. 'I'M EVEN STARTING TO FEEL IT NOW. MY GUNS ARE LIKE 'STUCK'.'

NEOLA JUST LOOKED AT HER OUT OF THE CORNER OF HER EYE AND SMILED PLAYFULLY, TURNING SLIGHTLY ON HER HEEL. IT WAS AS IF SHE DIDN'T CARE AT ALL ABOUT HER SURROUNDINGS AND THE FACT THAT THEY WERE IN A SEMI-DESERTED AREA, THOUSANDS OF MILES FROM THE NEAREST OUTBREAK OF CIVILIZATION.

- DON'T SWEAT SUCH A SMALL THING, WE MAY BE SHORT OF QUITE A FEW THINGS, BUT WE STILL HAVE ENOUGH BOTTLES FOR AT LEAST A MONTH TO COME.

- 'MY GIRL,' ZENGAR ENDOOKIA DARED TO OPEN HER MOUTH, 'YOU HAVEN'T CHANGED AT ALL SINCE THE LAST TIME I SAW YOU.'

- 'BUT, YOU, UNCLE ZENGAR, HAD TWO EYES THEN,' NEOLA SHOOK HER HEAD, 'CLEARLY TIMES ARE CHANGING,' HERE SHE PAUSED BRIEFLY, 'THINGS ARE DEFINITELY TAKING A TURN FOR THE WORSE.'

AFTER RESTING FOR A FEW MINUTES, GETTING A BURST OF STRENGTH FROM THE CONCENTRATED CALORIC FOOD AND CHANGING THEIR OXYGEN BOTTLES, THEY WERE NOW ABLE TO SATISFY THE CURIOSITY OF THEIR KIND 'HOSTESS'.

- 'WELL, TELL US WHAT BRINGS YOU THIS WAY,' SHE COULD NOT CONTAIN HERSELF.

WITHOUT SPARING ANY DETAILS OF THEIR SHARED EXPERIENCES, THEY BOTH RECOUNTED THE MOST INTERESTING OF THEIR ADVENTURES TOGETHER. SHE LISTENED ATTENTIVELY AND INTENTLY WITHOUT INTERRUPTING THEM, HER FACIAL FEATURES CHANGING BARELY NOTICEABLY.

- HONESTLY, WE'VE BEEN HERE FOR ALMOST SIX WEEKS NOW AND WE'RE COMPLETELY CUT OFF FROM THE OUTSIDE WORLD. OUR ONLY 'CONNECTION' IS THE RADIO AIRWAVES. BUT IT KEEPS CRACKLING AND PICKING UP ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. NO MATTER HOW HARD WE TRY, FOR THE MOMENT WE ARE COMPLETELY ISOLATED FROM WHAT IS HAPPENING ON THE SURFACE.

- 'I CAN HELP YOU FIX IT, AS I'M A QUALIFIED AERONAUTICAL ENGINEER,' SASIA OFFERED HER SERVICES. 'PERHAPS THE RELAY AND ONE OR TWO INTEGRATED CIRCUITS FOR THE DIGITAL SOUND TRANSFORMER NEED TO BE REPLACED.'

THE MEN WERE SILENT IN BEWILDERMENT, BUT IT WAS CLEAR FROM THEIR EXPRESSIONS THAT SOMETHING WAS BOTHERING THEM. IT DID NOT ESCAPE THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THE ONE-EYED ZENGAR, WHO MOVED HIS SINGLE EYE NOW TO NEOLA, NOW TO SASIA, THOUGH HE REMAINED SEEMINGLY UNPERTURBED.

- 'WE DON'T HAVE SUCH THINGS,' ENDWHITE VENTURED TO CALL. 'BUT WE CAN FIND THEM IF WE LOOK. THERE'S A LOT OF DEBRIS AND RUBBISH ROLLING AROUND. THERE'S BOUND TO BE SOMETHING OF USE.'

- 'WELL, WELL,' NEOLA INTERJECTED MOST UNEXPECTEDLY. 'I THINK IT'S TIME FOR BED. IN HIBERNATION MODE, SPACESUITS CONSUME LESS COMPRESSED OXYGEN, AND WE SHOULD CONSERVE IT. WHO KNOWS IF WE'LL FIND NEW SUPPLIES FROM SOMEWHERE?'

EVERYONE COMPLIED WITH WHAT SHE SAID, AS IT WAS GOING TO DAWN SOON. SASIA ALSO FLOPPED INTO A MAKESHIFT 'SLEEPING

BAG' THAT NEOLA'S PEOPLE HAD MADE OUT OF VARIOUS PIECES OF QUISSON AND PLEXONIARS, BUT SLEEP COULD NOT HOLD HER IN ITS EMBRACE FOR A LONG TIME. ALTHOUGH SHE WAS AT THE EDGE OF HER PHYSICAL CAPABILITIES, AMONG COMPLETE STRANGERS WHO GENERALLY STILL DIDN'T INSPIRE MUCH CONFIDENCE IN HER, SHE TRIED TO FORCE HERSELF TO SLEEP AND HAD ALMOST SUCCEEDED WHEN SHE MOST SURPRISINGLY HEARD SOME STRANGE, BARELY AUDIBLE SOUNDS. PRETENDING TO BE ASLEEP, SHE SCARCELY OPENED HER EYELIDS, AND SOME SEMBLANCE OF LIGHT FILTERED THROUGH THE NARROW SLITS BETWEEN HER KNITTED LASHES. IN THE FARTHEST CORNER OF THE CAVE, ALMOST COMPLETELY OBSCURED BY CLOSELY SPACED STALACTITES, TWO WISPY SILHOUETTES SHIMMERED. ONE WAS SHORT AND TANTURING, WHILE THE OTHER WAS TALL AND SLENDER. SASIA LISTENED IN ON THEIR CONVERSATION.

- 'WILL HE TAKE US WHERE WE WANT TO GO?', 'SOME STRANGE VOICE BABBLED IN THE DARKNESS. ONE HAD TO MAKE QUITE AN EFFORT TO CATCH THAT LOW, THICK, BASS SOUND, MUCH LESS TO MAKE OUT THE MEANING OF THE INARTICULATE SPEECH.

- 'WE CANNOT BE SURE, BUT TREAT IT WELL FOR NOW. YOU MUST NOT RAISE ANY SUSPICIONS. I CLEARLY SENSE THAT SHE DOES NOT TRUST US YET. AND WHY SHOULD SHE?', 'ADDED ANOTHER VOICE, WHICH, THOUGH GREATLY MUFFLED, SOUNDED LIKE A BADLY OILED SEWING-MACHINE OF THE DISTANT PAST. IT WAS JUST IRRITATINGLY IMPOSSIBLE, BUT CERTAINLY CAUTIOUS ENOUGH.

- 'YOU'RE RIGHT,' THE FIRST VOICE CHUCKLED. 'SHE HASN'T EVEN A CLUE WHERE SHE'S GOT TO. DID YOU PUT HER GUN AWAY, REMEMBER?'

- 'NEVER MIND,' THE SECOND VOICE CONDESCENDED, 'LET'S GO TO BED, BECAUSE SHE MIGHT HEAR US.'

^^^

SASIA HAD TAKEN IT UPON HERSELF TO FIX THE DAMAGED SPEEDER IN A TIMELY MANNER. AND SHE KNEW HOW TO KEEP HER PROMISES. ONE WOULD HAVE SIMPLY ENJOYED WATCHING HER CAREFULLY ATTACHING THE INTEGRATED CIRCUITS AND SOLDERING CAPACITORS, USING A TRANSLATOR PNEUMATIC HAMMER TO STRAIGHTEN EVASIVE HULL PARTS, AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST TRYING TO DO A BASIC UPDATE TO THE OLD OPERATING SYSTEM TO FIX A BUG THAT MADE IT IMPOSSIBLE TO SEE THE AMOUNT OF INTERRON FUEL IN THE TANK. SHE THEN SET ABOUT CHECKING THAT THE MICROPLASMA TURBINES WERE MAINTAINING THE REQUIRED RPMs TO MAKE A STABLE FLIGHT. OF COURSE SHE WASN'T DOING THIS ENTIRELY ALONE AS HER FRIENDS WERE HELPING HER AS BEST THEY COULD, OR AT LEAST TRYING.

SWEAT DRIPPED FROM HER BROW DESPITE THE SUIT'S BUILT-IN COOLING. BUT THEY HAD NO TIME TO WASTE. SHE HAD TO FINISH THIS AN HOUR SOONER.

NEOLA WASN'T JEALOUS THAT IT WAS SASIA WHO HAD BECOME THE CENTER OF ATTENTION DUE TO HER COMPETENCE. THEY HAD TO GET OUT OF HERE AND SHE WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO WAS AWARE OF WHAT SHE WAS DOING. EXCEPT SOMETHING WAS NAGGING AT HER, AND THAT WAS HOW THEY WERE GOING TO GET RID OF HER AFTER SHE DID HER JOB. UNCLE ZENGAR WAS DEAD. ONE NIGHT THEY JUST SAW THAT HE HAD BOWED HIS EYES FOREVER. BUT AT LEAST HE HAD BROUGHT HER TO THEM. NEOLA WAS GRATEFUL FOR THAT, TOO.

ENDEAVOUR FUSSED AROUND THE PILOT AS IF HE LIKED HER. TRULY THIS LITTLE WOMAN, SHE POSSESSED THE AGILITY OF A CAT AND HAD A MIND AS SHARP AS A RAZOR. HOW SHE ONLY SKILLFULLY FIXED THE DIGITAL SOUND TRANSLATOR, WITHOUT WHICH THE SPEEDER WAS PRACTICALLY USELESS. HOW HE DEFTLY CONNECTED WIRES, ADJUSTED EVERY DETAIL WITH INFERNAL PRECISION.

ONE THING WEIGHED ON HIM, THOUGH. HE'D BEEN THE ONE CHOSEN TO KILL HER SO THAT NEOLA AND HER PEOPLE COULD SAVE



THEMSELVES. THERE WAS ONLY A MAXIMUM OF FOUR PEOPLE THEY COULD FIT IN THE SPEEDER, AND THAT WAS IF THE PILOT SEATS WERE REMOVED. THE PURPOSE WAS THE COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLES WOULD KEEP THEM IN HIBERNATION UNTIL THEY WENT INTO ORBIT AROUND ZEGANDARIA. THE SPEEDER WASN'T SUITED FOR SO-CALLED SPACE JUMPS, NOR DID IT HAVE AN EXTRA REINFORCED HULL, BUT IT WOULD LAST AT LEAST A LITTLE WHILE THE ENZORIA TOOK THEM IN. SUCH A PLAN WAS VERY BOLD, BUT THEY WERE COUNTING ON IT TO SUCCEED.

- 'WHAT ARE YOU THINKING?,' JOKINGLY THREW SASIA AT HIM, HER FACE AS RED AS A RADISH. 'IT'S LIKE SOMEONE THREW AN EZONIUM BOMB IN YOUR FACE! HA HA. RELAX A BIT.'

- 'WELL ... I ... SUCH,' ENDWHITE MUTTERED. 'I'M GLAD WE'RE ON THE SAME TEAM. I LIKE BEING OF USE.'

- 'YOU REALLY ARE,' SHE TOSSED HIM A COQUETTISH LOOK. 'I HARDLY THINK YOU'LL FIND A SIDEKICK LIKE THAT AROUND.'

NEOLA FOLLOWED THEIR CONVERSATION ALL TOO CLOSELY, ALBEIT FROM A DISTANCE. SHE WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT IF SHE COULD RELY ON ENDEAVOUR OR IF SHE HAD TO INVOLVE SOMEONE ELSE. SHE WAS IMPRESSED BY THE LOOKS THEY WERE THROWING EACH OTHER. WHAT WAS GOING ON HERE?

BEFORE THE RENOVATIONS HAD STARTED THEY'D GONE TO A PLACE NEARBY THAT EVERYONE CALLED THE GRAVEYARD. ALL SORTS OF JUNK ROLLED IN THERE AND IT WAS THE STRANGEST AREA IN ALL OF RODWELL. IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG FOR SASIA TO FIGURE OUT THAT THIS WAS WHERE THEY'D STASHED THEIR SOUL-HARVESTING BATTLE COMPANIONS TO KEEP THEM OUT OF SIGHT. IT WAS A PRACTICE IN THE ARMY TO LET THE WOUNDED DIE OF THEIR OWN VOLITION, OR TURN OFF THEIR OXYGEN SUPPLY. NO AMMUNITION WAS WASTED THAT THE LIVING MIGHT LATER NEED. IT TOOK THEM MORE THAN TWO DAYS TO LOCATE TARPAULIN TUBES FOR INTERRON FUEL AND MISCELLANEOUS CHARCALS THAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN USEFUL. WHAT WAS THEIR SURPRISE WHEN PIECES OF INTEGRATED CIRCUITRY

SHOWED THEMSELVES FROM UNDER THE DEBRIS, AND SASIA, SET TO WORK ASSEMBLING AND JOINING THEM WITH LOW-VISCOSITY GLUE, AND THEN WITH METAL-BASED LEROUANE PARMESAN. THE COLLECTED WIRES TURNED OUT TO BE COMPLETELY FRIED AND UNFIT FOR ANYTHING. THEY HAD TO BE RE-WALKED, SOMETHING THAT WASN'T VERY MUCH TO THE LIKING OF NEOLA, WHO WAS SKIMPING ON EVERY CAPSULE OF COMPRESSED OXYGEN. THE SECOND TIME, HOWEVER, THEY GOT LUCKY AND SOMEHOW MANAGED TO FIND EVEN A RIANDAN TERAFLYTER. THE DEVICE WAS JUST LYING HALF BURIED IN THE DUST AND SAND, BUT AFTER A BRIEF CHECK IT APPEARED TO BE WORKING.

- 'THIS THING CAN BE USED,' SASIA SAID CALMLY. 'BUT I NEED TO GUT THE HULL AND GET THE IRETHIUM THREADS FOR THE TRACER.'

- 'AS LONG AS YOU'RE SURE THEY'LL DO THE JOB,' ENDWHITE SHRUGGED. 'IT'S ALL RIGHT.'

WHEN THEY RETURNED, THEY SAW THAT NEOLA'S PEOPLE HAD POLISHED THE SURFACE OF THE HULL COMPOSITE AND APPLIED A SPECIAL PROTECTIVE PASTE, AS SHE HAD INSTRUCTED. UPON ENTERING THE STRATOSPHERE, IT WAS WHAT WOULD PROVIDE THEM WITH PRECIOUS SECONDS BEFORE THE HULL BEGAN TO GLOW DANGEROUSLY.

THE VERY IDEA WAS MORE THAN A LITTLE FAR-FETCHED, BUT BEHIND THEM WAS DEATH, AND IN FRONT OF THEM WAS DEATH AGAIN. THERE WAS SALVATION ONLY IN THE SKY, IN OPEN SPACE. THEY WISHED THEY COULD FLY LIKE BIRDS. TO FLY FREE. TO THINK OF NOTHING. ABOUT ALL THIS WAR. ALL THIS CHAOS. BUT NOTHING COULD CHANGE NOW. ALL WAS LOST LONG AGO. THEY COULD ONLY HOPE THEY WERE ON THE RIGHT TRACK AND OF COURSE ACT.

- 'WHEN WILL YOU BE READY?,' NEOLA GLARED AT THEM FROM UNDER HER EYEBROWS AND GROWLED SLIGHTLY DEFIANTLY.

- ALL THAT'S LEFT TO DO IS SET UP SOME OF THE RELATIONAL MECHANISMS IN THE TRANSFORMER BOX TO EQUALIZE THE COCKPIT PRESSURE.

- 'OKAY.,' THE REDHEAD MUTTERED, TURNING AROUND AND SEEMING TO STOP CARING ABOUT THEM ALTOGETHER.

- 'I THINK SHE'S JEALOUS,' ENDWHITE MUTTERED.

- 'DON'T THINK SO,' SASIA WHISPERED WITH HER HEAD SLIGHTLY BOWED. 'THERE'S NO REASON FOR HIM TO. LET'S GET TO WORK, PARTNER.'

IT WAS STARTING TO GET DARK NOW, AND THEY NEEDED TO USE THE LAST REMNANTS OF DAYLIGHT TO WORK OUT SOME FINAL DETAILS. THE NEXT MORNING THEY ALSO HAD TO PREPARE A SPECIAL MAKESHIFT CHUTE FOR THE HORIZONTAL TAKEOFF OF THE SPEEDER, AS THE LATERAL STABILIZERS WERE STILL GIVING SOME DEFECTS ON VERTICAL TAKEOFF.

- 'WHAT WERE THOSE OBSOLETE EQUATORIAL STABILISERS FOR,' SASIA SAID ANGRILY. 'THEY GAVE SERIOUS DEVIATIONS IN THE BALANCE OF THE MACHINE WHEN THE POLARITY CHANGED. BUT THAT'S WHAT WE CAN PUT IN.'

ENDWHITE MENTALLY COUNTED THE MINUTES UNTIL HE WAS GOING TO DRIVE THE LASER CUTTER INTO HER BACK. HE HAD MENTALLY PREPARED HIMSELF AND WHERE TO HIDE THE CORPSE. HE WAS EVEN CONSIDERING DUMPING HIS COMRADES. HE KNEW THAT ONCE HE WAS DONE WITH THE PILOT, IT WOULD BE HIS TURN. AND THEY'D PROBABLY JUST STRANGLE HIM WITH A PIECE OF QUIZON. JUST LIKE IN THE GOOD OLD DAYS. HOW CORNY!

BUT THE SPEEDER HAD TO BE FULLY OPERATIONAL AND WELL STOCKED WITH OXYGEN CAPSULES. OTHERWISE IT WAS POINTLESS TO TAKE THAT RISK AND MISS HIS LAST CHANCE TO GET OUT OF HERE.

WHAT WAS TAKING SO LONG WITH THE REPAIRS ENDWHITE COULDN'T FATHOM, BUT HE WAITED PATIENTLY FOR AN OPPORTUNE MOMENT.

HE WAS WELL AWARE OF WHAT NEOLA HAD PLANNED, ALONG WITH RADSOIL AND EDWARD. HE HAD TO GET AHEAD OF THE MOMENT.

^^^

RADSOIL - A LARGE MAN - KNEW WELL THE MEANING OF THE WORD 'BOSS'. NEOLA WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO SAVED HIS HIDE ONCE AND HE WOULD NEVER FORGET IT. HIS ROUGH HANDS, LIKE STEAM HAMMERS, WERE AT HER DISPOSAL. EDOUARD WAS WEAK, BUT UTTERLY UNPREDICTABLE, AND IN ENDEAVOUR'S OBSERVATION, WOULD DO ANYTHING IF ASKED. WITH GREAT EFFORT THEY HAD SURVIVED IN THESE CAVES THESE PAST FOUR WEEKS, AND DESPITE NEOLA'S SEEMING KIND WORDS, THE BLOOD OF HIS SLAIN BATTLE COMPANIONS HUMMED IN HIS EARS. THIS WAR SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN THERE AT ALL. BUT WAS THERE A CHOICE? THE FIRST RECRUITMENT HAD NEARLY CAUGHT HIM IN A FIELD NEAR ENSARIAN WHILE TENDING A SMALL PLANTATION OF ELENORANS. HE'D BASICALLY GONE TO THE FRONT LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, HAD GONE THROUGH THE MANDATORY SIX WEEKS OF TRAINING IN MARKSMANSHIP, ZIRUARX'S MANAGEMENT, AND HAND-TO-HAND COMBAT, AND HAD DEFENDED POSITIONS THE UBUNDER HIGH COUNCIL HAD DEEMED IMPORTANT. WHEN THE ENEMY CAME AND HAD OCCUPIED ALL OF RODWELL, WHICH WAS ONE OF THE OUTPOSTS FOR SYNTHROS, HE WAS A MACHINE GUNNER.

PLASMA MACHINE GUNS WERE ONE OF THE MAIN WEAPONS FOR HOLDING OFF ENEMY FIRE.

RODWELL MANAGED TO WITHSTAND THE ONSLAUGHT OF THE ENEMY ATTACK FOR EXACTLY THREE DAYS BEFORE CAPITULATING INGLORIOUSLY. RUNNING OUT OF AMMUNITION WAS DEFINITELY A PROBLEM. SUPPLYING NEW FRESH MANPOWER WAS TOO. DESPITE

NEOLA'S BOASTFUL WORDS THAT OXYGEN BOTTLES WERE PLENTIFUL - THIS WAS NOT TRUE AT ALL. IN FACT, THEY WERE ALMOST OUT OF THEM, BUT WHAT WAS IMPORTANT WAS THAT THIS SKILLED PILOT WITH A COMBAT SPEEDER WAS COMING TO THEM AS A GODSEND. EDOUARD, WHO WAS CONSIDERABLY MORE INTELLIGENT, WAS A PILOT, BUT WITH NOTHING TO SHOW FOR IT. HE WOULD STEER THE CROOKED-LEFT SPEEDER - IF ONLY TO GET AWAY FROM RODWELL.

THE PLAN TO KILL SASIA WAS MOSTLY DICTATED BY THE FACT THAT THEY CONSIDERED HER A TRAITOR. NO PILOT WAS GOING TO FLY COMPLETELY ALONE OVER A SEMI-DESERTED AREA WITHOUT MARKER PATCHES ON HER SPACESUIT, MUCH LESS DRAG SOME DANCER DWARF BEHIND HER.

THEY COULD SENSE THAT ENDWIGHT WAS HESITANT, SO NEOLA HAD GIVEN THEM THE AUTHORITY TO STEP IN AND DO THE JOB FOR HIM IF THE SITUATION GOT OUT OF HAND.

- 'GET THE PIECE OF QUIZON READY,' RADSOIL MUTTERED.

- 'I'LL TAKE ONE TOO, IF YOU CAN'T HANDLE IT,' ADDED EDOUARD. 'ENDWHITE MUST THINK WE DON'T SUSPECT HIS IDEA TO DUMP US LIKE A SACK FULL OF ELENDORANS.'

- 'HE THINKS HE CAN GET AWAY WITHOUT US.,' RADSOIL CHUCKLED. 'THE CHIEF GAVE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS.'

NEOLA'S GOAL, HOWEVER, WAS NOT TO RETURN TO ENSARIAN, BUT TO DUMP ALL THOSE FOOLS. THEY WERE GOING TO COURT MARTIAL THEM. YES THEY WERE HER BATTLE COMRADES, YES THEY OBEYED HER IMPLICITLY BECAUSE SHE KEPT THEM ON LIFE SAVING DRUGS. WITHOUT HER, THE WOUNDS INFLICTED ON THEM BY THE PLASMA WEAPONS WOULD HAVE REOPENED. THEY WOULD HAVE PERISHED. THAT GRATITUDE WAS TURNING INTO POWER IN HER HANDS. BUT THE TRAINED RADSOIL AND EDOUAR THE PSEUDOPILOT MIGHT NOT NEED HER SERVICES SOON. THE SITUATION WASN'T IN HER FAVOR, AND SHE HAD TO USE THE SITUATION AND BEAT EVERYONE ELSE TO

GET AWAY SCOT-FREE. SHE HAD HEARD OF VARIOUS WAYS TO LEAVE THIS PLANET WITHOUT A TRACE AND TAKE UP RESIDENCE ON ONE OF THE MANY UNINHABITED COLONIES BEYOND THE ASTEROID BELT. SHE JUST HAD NO CLEAR IDEA HOW TO GET THERE. THERE BEGAN A WHOLE NEW WORLD SHE HADN'T EVEN DREAMED OF. SHE HAD NO IDEA HOW SHE WAS GOING TO SURVIVE ALL ALONE, OR IF THE CONDITIONS IN THOSE COLONIES WERE BEARABLE FOR A LADY WITH HER RANK OF COLONEL AND MILITARY DOCTOR. THE SPACE AROUND THE ASTEROID BELT IN QUESTION WAS PRACTICALLY VERY POORLY EXPLORED, BUT THAT WAS WHERE RECKLESS DAREDEVILS WENT, WILLING TO DO ANYTHING TO SURVIVE. SHE COULD, IF SHE WAS LUCKY, JOIN SOMEONE TO HELP HER.

THERE WAS, HOWEVER, ONE PROBLEM THAT WORRIED HER GREATLY. SHE COULDN'T COUNT ON THE SPEEDER HOLDING UP WHEN SHE ENTERED THE STRATOSPHERE, AND IF THERE WAS NO ONE UP THERE TO PICK HER UP, SHE WOULD JUST PERISH INGLORIOUSLY.

SINCE SASIA WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO UNDERSTOOD AND READ SPACE MAPS WELL, THOUGH IT WAS ONLY PERIPHERALLY COVERED IN HER PILOT TRAINING, SHE HAD MADE A PLAN TO MAKE CONTACT WITH SOME SHIPS STANDING IN GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT AND PATROLLING NEAR THE PLANET. ONE WAS THE CALLISTO 142, THE OTHER THE EMSATO 199. THE TWO SPACECRAFT WERE THE ONLY ONES THAT COULD GET THEM TO THAT PART OF THE PLANET, AND THAT WAS ASSUMING HER CALCULATIONS PROVED CORRECT. OF COURSE THERE COULD BE A DISCREPANCY IN THE PLOTTED TRAJECTORIES. BUT THERE WAS NO AVOIDING THAT.

NEOLA WAS AWARE OF HER ACTIONS AND HAD TO ADMIT THAT THE PLAN TO LIQUIDATE HER WAS STILL ON THE TABLE. INWARDLY SHE DIDN'T WANT TO WIPE OUT HER TALENTS, BUT WHAT ELSE WAS THERE TO DO WHEN THEY WERE GOING TO HOLD HER RESPONSIBLE AS A SENIOR OFFICER FOR THE HUGE LOSSES SHE HAD SUFFERED. ENSARIAN PRISON WAS A TRULY FRIGHTENING PLACE. NOT THAT NEOLA WASN'T USED TO THE BARRACKS WAYS, BUT IT WAS A LIVING

HELL IN THERE. LIFE IMPRISONMENT WITH NO RIGHT OF EXCHANGE FOR A MISDEMEANOR OF HER KIND. AN ETERNITY BETWEEN FOUR WALLS. AND ETERNAL LONELINESS. NOT IF SHE HAD TO SPEND THE REST OF HER LIFE SOMEWHERE, FAR BETTER TO DO IT IN OPEN SPACE WHERE THERE WAS STILL SOME HOPE OF SALVATION.

SHE HAD ALSO HIDDEN AN ESSENTIAL FACT. THE RADIO BEACON WAS NOT COMPLETELY EMPTY. QUITE BY ACCIDENT, SHE HAD INTERCEPTED SOMETHING. THE SIGNALS PICKED UP, DESPITE THE INTERFERENCE, INDICATED THAT COMMUNICATION COULD BE MADE WITH SOME OF THE ENEMY'S FORWARD OUTPOSTS. BUT SHE HAD NO DESIRE TO DESERT EITHER, GIVING AWAY VALUABLE INFORMATION. EVERYONE KNEW THE ELOHYN POLICY FOR DEALING WITH DESERTERS. THEY LIQUIDATED THEM ONCE THEY GOT HER.

SO SASIA - THE MILITARY PILOT - WHO SHE'D ONLY KNOWN FOR A FEW HOURS WAS HER ONLY ROUTE TO SALVATION. PRETTY IRONIC, BUT ALSO PRETTY SCARY.

HER PLAN WAS TO SIMPLY STRANGLE SASIA WITH A PIECE OF QUIZON, AND THEN HIDE HER IN THE CEMETERY, WHICH WAS NO MORE THAN FIFTEEN MINUTES AWAY FROM THEIR HABITAT. THEY'D NATURALLY RIP OFF THE IDENTIFYING PATCHES, AND TO MAKE SURE THE TRACKS DIDN'T SHOW THEY'D JUST SET FIRE TO HER CORPSE WITH SOME INTEREST FUEL. THE IDEA WAS AT ONCE VERY SIMPLE AND VERY SNEAKY. BUT NEOLA HAD SURVIVED THIS WAY ALL HER CONSCIOUS LIFE. HOW WOULD THE SITUATION BE ANY DIFFERENT THIS TIME? IT WAS PARADOXICAL THAT SHE HAD CHOSEN TO PRACTICE SUCH A HUMANE PROFESSION AS A MILITARY MEDIC. USING THE RADSOIL AND THE EDUAR, SHE COULD ATTACH HERSELF TO ONE OF THE TWO SMALL PATROL SHIPS WITH THE STOLEN SPEEDER AND HIJACK IT. THEN, SHE COULD 'VEGETATE' FOR A WHILE IN GEOSTATIONARY ORBIT AFTER SHUTTING DOWN ALL POSSIBLE SYSTEMS ON THE SHIP AND LEAVING IT IN HIBERNATION. IF HE WAS LUCKY, HE COULD USE IT AS A DECOY FOR A REAL BATTLECRUISER WITH WHICH TO GET TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT, OR AS IT WAS ALSO KNOWN 'QUADRANT 426'. AND THEN? THEN HE'D THINK OF IT...

AS A SENIOR OFFICER, SHE WAS AWARE THAT THE SPACE OF THE GALAXY EXPLORED SO FAR WAS DIVIDED INTO 452 QUADRANTS, AND THEY WERE IN QUADRANT 39. COLLAPSAR JUMPS WERE THE ONLY WAY TO BRIDGE SUCH A DISTANCE, AND WITH ALL-OUT WAR BREAKING OUT ON THE PLANET, CONTROL OF THE CENTRAL AUTHORITY WOULD BE LOOSENED AND SHE MIGHT AS WELL BITE OFF A SMALL PIECE OF THE PIE BEFORE SHE GOT OUT.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE NAVY

STARFLEET WAS IN A STATE OF FREE 'HOVER' IN OPEN SPACE NEAR THE ORBIT OF ZEGANDARIA. THE VIEW OF THE HOME PLANET FROM ALOFT WAS TRULY IMPRESSIVE. THERE WAS SOMETHING PRIMAL AND UNIQUE ABOUT IT. IT WAS SORELY MISSED BY EVERYONE ON THE ENZORIA CREW. THE ULTRA-MODERN MILITARY CRUISER, CAPABLE OF MOVING AT SUPERLUMINAL SPEEDS, WAS UNDER THE COMMAND OF REAR ADMIRAL KENJI NOLSURO.

IT DESCENDED MAJESTICALLY ON THE BRIDGE, BUT WITHOUT UNNECESSARY EXCESSES. HE DEFINITELY KNEW HOW TO MOTIVATE THE BOYS. ASIDE FROM BEING A TALENTED MILITARY PILOT AND BATTLESHIP COMMANDER, KENJI HAD ANOTHER PASSION THAT WAS NOT AT ALL SURPRISING - MARTIAL ARTS. HE HIMSELF WAS THE FOUNDER OF AN ULTRA-MODERN STYLE OF ARMY COMBAT THAT INCORPORATED ELEMENTS OF BOXING, KICKBOXING, WRESTLING, GRAPPLING, AND NINJUTSU - AS MANY WOULD PUT IT, 'A LETHAL COMBINATION.'

WHEN THEY WEREN'T ON WATCH, SOLDIERS LIKED TO HAVE FREE-FOR-ALL FIGHTS WITHOUT RULES IN LOW-GRAVITY CONDITIONS. FOR EACH OF THE RECRUITS, IT WAS A REAL TEST. IT WAS BASICALLY A TEST OF MANHOOD, AN ENTRANCE EXAM YOU HAD TO PASS TO BE TRUSTED. THE IDEA ACTUALLY BELONGED TO KENJI, WHO BELIEVED THAT 'A WEAPON IS NOTHING MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF THE



ARM.' THAT IS, TRAINING HAD TO START WITH THE LIMBS THAT NATURE HAD ENDOWED US WITH.

- 'HOW ARE THE QUANTUM STABILIZERS, ENLOW?,' HE ASKED, STANDING BEHIND THE SHIP'S FIRST CAPTAIN IN THE HUGE COMMAND ROOM FILLED WITH HOLOGRAM SCREENS. 'DO WE NEED TO CHANGE THE PARAMETERS IN CASE AN ASTEROID STORM HITS?'

DOUG ENLOW, THE YOUNGEST CAPTAIN OF A TOP-TIER BATTLECRUISER IN THE HISTORY OF THE ZEGANDARIAN AIR FLEET, SMILED SLIGHTLY, BUT ANSWERED IN ALL SERIOUSNESS:

- EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL, SIR. ON-BOARD COMPUTERS REPORT NO ONE IN OUR VICINITY. THE NEAREST ONE IS IN THE BETA CENTAURI CONSTELLATION.

- 'AND HOW LONG ARE WE GOING TO WAIT FOR NEW RECRUITS?,' KENJI TURNED TO DOUG WITH ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE IMPATIENCE.

- YOU KNOW IT'S NOT UP TO US, COMMANDER, BUT FROM WHAT I HEAR, IT COULD BE AS EARLY AS TODAY.

- 'VERY WELL THEN,' KENJI SAID WITH A SLIGHT, ELEGANT BOW AS HE MOVED AWAY AND INTO HIS OWN QUARTERS.

THE QUARTERS FOR SENIOR OFFICERS OF THE ZEGANDARIAN FLEET, EVEN THE MOST SENIOR, WERE NOT MODELS OF COMFORT AND SPACE. KENJI'S QUARTERS WERE NO EXCEPTION. BUT HE NEEDED TO COLLECT HIS THOUGHTS. HE'D BEEN WAITING LIKE A MISGUIDED DEVIL FOR A SECOND WEEK NOW, WHILE THOSE DOWN THERE BICKERED ABOUT GOD KNEW WHAT. BUT HE HAD NO CHOICE. ACCORDING TO THE ARRANGEMENTS THEY HAD WITH ELOHY, RESOURCES FROM UBUNDER'S AIR FLEET WERE SUPPOSED TO BE INVOLVED IN TRANSPORTING CRIMINALS. OF TERRIBLE WAR CRIMINALS, AS HIS MASTERS ASSURED HIM. DESPITE HIS FREE-SPIRITED TEMPER, KENJI RESPECTED SENIORITY. AN ORDER WAS AN ORDER. SOMETIMES HE WONDERED HOW GUILTY THOSE HE WAS TRANSPORTING TO LABOR COLONY 206 ACTUALLY WERE. BUT IN THESE MATTERS, HE WAS KEPT COMPLETELY IN THE DARK. THE

HONEST AND INTELLIGENT FACES OF THE CHAINED MEN, ACCUSED OF TREASON, AWAKENED THE REMORSE OF HIS CONSCIENCE. HE DOUBTED WHETHER HE WAS DOING THE RIGHT THING, AND THIS CAUSED NIGHTMARES IN HIS DREAMS.

KENJI WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT HE WAS THE MAN WHO WAS SENDING THEM TO AN UNPLEASANT PLACE. HE KNEW THAT IT HELD A SPECIAL STATUS AND WAS PRACTICALLY OUTSIDE THE JURISDICTION OF THE UBUNDER MILITARY COUNCIL AND THE MILITARY TRIBUNAL OF IMGRADON. OTHER LAWS SIMPLY RULED THERE. THE LAWS OF THE COLONY.

HIS THOUGHTS WERE INTERRUPTED BY A LIGHT TAPPING ON THE HYDRON DOOR.

- 'THEY HAVE ARRIVED, SIR. THEY'RE HERE NOW!,' THE VOICE WAS THAT OF HIS ADJUTANT, WINNOW RICHWATER.

KENJI WOULD HAVE WIPED AWAY THE FINE BEADS OF DISCOLOURED SWEAT ON HIS BROW, BUT THAT WOULD HAVE SPOILED HIS IMMACULATE HAIRSTYLE. AND AN OFFICER OF HIS RANK HAD TO KEEP UP APPEARANCES.

- 'UNDERSTOOD, ADJUTANT. I'M COMING!,' HE UTTERED IN A SEEMINGLY INDIFFERENT VOICE.

IN LESS THAN TWO MINUTES THE REAR ADMIRAL, FOLLOWED BY HIS ADJUTANT, REACHED ONE OF THE MOST UNTIDY STORAGE ROOMS ON BOARD, WHERE THEY USUALLY STOWED THE NEWCOMERS. CRATES OF SUPPLIES AND VARIOUS TOOLS THAT WARSHIPS SUCH AS THE ENZORIA DELIVERED TO THE PLANET ON WHICH THE COLONY WAS LOCATED ROLLED AROUND.

THE ROOM WAS RELATIVELY DIMLY LIT. WITH HIS EXCELLENT PILOT'S EYESIGHT, KENJI COULD SENSE EVEN IN THE DIM GREENISH LIGHT THAT BATHED THE HOLD THAT HIS PASSENGERS WERE FAR FROM RANDOM THIS TIME. BUT HE COULD NOT REMEMBER WHERE HE HAD SEEN THESE FACES.

AN ENTIRE PLATOON OF 'GHOST WARRIORS' - THAT WAS WHAT THEY CALLED ZEGANDARIA'S MOST ELITE COMMANDOS - HAD BEEN ENGAGED TO GUARD THE NEW PRISONERS.

THE PRISONERS WORE TORTURED AND DEJECTED EXPRESSIONS. THEIR EYES WERE LIKE THE EYES OF CATTLE BEING LED TO THE SLAUGHTER - IN THEM ONE COULD READ AN ANIMAL TERROR OF THE UNKNOWN. IN THE BOTTOM OF HIS SOUL KENJI WANTED TO SAY A WORD OR TWO OF ENCOURAGEMENT TO THEM, BUT HE REFRAINED, REALIZING THE FULL ABSURDITY OF THE SITUATION. WHAT WOULD THE OTHERS SAY, INCLUDING HIS OWN ADJUTANT? SURELY THEY WOULD THINK HIM MAD! THE HEAVY DEAD ATMOSPHERE IN THE HOLD WAS SUFFOCATING HIM.

HE MERELY WAVED HIS HAND. AND LEFT THE ROOM, BATHED IN SUCH A SICKLY GREENISH COLOR, SUGGESTING UNHAPPY THOUGHTS, EVEN TO A FREE MAN OF HIS STATION.

- 'WAS ANYONE MISSING FROM THE LIST?,' HE TURNED TO THE ADJUTANT.

- 'NO, SIR! THEY ARE ALL PRESENT!,' SAID RICHWATER, STRETCHED LIKE A STRING BEFORE HIS COMMANDER.

- 'THEN PUT IT INTO OVERDRIVE, BECAUSE WE'RE RUNNING A LITTLE BEHIND SCHEDULE,' HE CALLED TO DOUG ENLOW, ENTERING THE ENSORIA'S COMMAND ROOM.

^^^

TO SOME, THE COSMOS MAY SEEM INFINITE AND INDEFINITE IN NATURE. A SOURCE OF MYSTERY AND UNATTAINABILITY. THIS IS OF COURSE TRUE, BUT ONLY TO A DEGREE. DISTORTIONS IN SPACE (AND WORMHOLES IN PARTICULAR) HAD LONG SINCE PROVIDED THE HUMAN RACE WITH ALMOST LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES FOR TRAVEL IN THE VAST VACUUM OF SPACE. CONTRARY TO NAÏVE PERCEPTIONS, THEY DID NOT ALLOW DIRECT POINT-TO-POINT TRAVEL, SINCE

QUANTUM-LEVEL CONNECTED BLACK HOLES COULD ALSO BE USED AS WORMHOLES. OF COURSE, THEIR EXACT LOCATION, AND THE TYPES OF SHIPS THAT WERE CAPABLE OF PASSING THROUGH THEM, WAS A TOP MILITARY SECRET. THAT WAS WHY IT WAS NO WONDER THEY HAD SENT AN ENTIRE REAR ADMIRAL TO ESCORT THE 'CRIMINALS' IN QUESTION.

THE SHIP SLOWLY BEGAN TO CONCENTRATE POWER AROUND ITS HULL. THE QUANTUM STABILIZERS WERE TURNED OFF. THE FOUR MAIN ION ENGINES WENT TO FULL POWER. THEY WERE ABOUT TO REACH FIRST SPACE SPEED.

KENJI WATCHED THE PROCEDURE OF PREPARING TO MAKE THE HYPERSPACE JUMP WITH WELL-CONCEALED TENSION. AS A MILITARY PILOT WITH EXTENSIVE FLYING EXPERIENCE, HE KNEW THAT EVERYTHING COULD ALWAYS GO WRONG IN SUCH SITUATIONS.

DOUG, HOWEVER, KNEW HIS JOB AND WATCHED FOR EVEN THE SLIGHTEST POSSIBLE MISTAKE.

- ENGINES AT FULL POWER. REACHING SECOND SPACE SPEED AFTER 10, 9, 8.

- '7, 6, 5,' KENJI MENTALLY COUNTED DOWN AS WELL.

SUDDENLY THE ENTIRE CRUISER SHUDDERED AND REACHED THE THRUST IT NEEDED TO OVERCOME THE PLANET'S GRAVITATIONAL FIELD AND LEAVE ITS ORBIT. 'THE ENZORIA ENTERED OPEN SPACE.

THE CADETS, WHO WERE ON THE BRIDGE AND NOT EVEN AWARE OF THE LIVING 'CARGO' ON BOARD, COULD BARELY RESTRAIN THEMSELVES FROM HOOTING AT DOUG'S SKILL. HE WAS SIMPLY A NATURAL TALENT. OF COURSE, THEY DIDN'T, BECAUSE A POSSIBLE SHOW OF DISRESPECT TO A SUPERIOR OFFICER COULD HAVE COST THEM NOT ONLY THEIR ENTIRE FUTURE CAREERS, BUT A SERIOUS REPRIMAND FROM THE ZEGANDARIAN COURT MARTIAL.

THE ADJUTANT HAD NOT BEEN ABLE TO WITNESS ALL THE SPECTACULAR PREPARATIONS FOR MAKING THE HYPERSPACE JUMP,

BECAUSE KENJI HAD SENT HIM ON AN IMPORTANT MISSION - TO EXTRACT SOME INFORMATION FROM THE CAPTIVES. HE CREPT ALONG THE LONG, DIMLY LIT AND OPPRESSIVE CORRIDORS OF THE MILITARY CRUISER. HE SEEMED TO BE IN THE SHAFT OF SOME PHARAONIC TOMB.

HE HAD GREAT RESPECT FOR THE REAR ADMIRAL, BUT IT WASN'T HIS SENIORITY OR VALOR THAT MADE HIM SUBMIT WITHOUT QUESTION. RICHWATER HIMSELF WAS ALSO WONDERING EXACTLY WHERE THEY WERE GOING.

HIS CURIOSITY WAS FUELED BY THE FACT THAT THE ENZORIA WAS TAKING ITS SECRET 'CARGO' NOT TO ITS FINAL DESTINATION, BUT TO AN ASTEROID NAMED CALISTRO 325. FAR FROM POSSESSING THE DIMENSIONS OF A SMALL PLANET, THE STELLAR BODY IN QUESTION WAS MORE LIKE A GIANT CHUNK OF ROCK ORBITING THE ASTEROID BELT OF THE CICADA CONSTELLATION IN STELLAR QUADRANT 415. THE SHEER NUMBER OF ASTEROIDS MADE REACHING IT A COMPLICATED ENOUGH TASK EVEN FOR A SUPERMODERN CRUISER LIKE THE ENSORIA. IT ALSO MADE IT MORE INCONSPICUOUS. EACH TIME DURING THEIR ARRIVAL, THE ASTEROID HAD A SERIOUS SECURITY PRESENCE. THOUGH TAKING HIS FIRST STEPS IN HIS CAREER AS A SENIOR MILITARY OFFICER, RICHWATER WAS NOT YESTERDAY'S MAN. THE LACK OF MARKINGS ON THE SOLDIERS' SPACESUITS SPOKE VOLUMES THAT EVEN A MAN WITH THE RANK OF REAR ADMIRAL, SUCH AS KENJI WAS, SHOULDN'T JUST STICK HIS NOSE INTO THESE THINGS FOR NO REASON.

OTHERWISE HE WAS RISKING HIS HEAD. THERE WAS NOTHING ELSE ON THE ASTEROID EXCEPT THE 'DISTRIBUTION CENTER,' AS THE SOLDIERS CALLED IT AMONG THEMSELVES. IT WAS A COLLECTION OF SEVERAL FACILITIES - A SPACEPORT FOR LAUNCHING SHUTTLES, INTERRON FUEL DEPOTS, AND A COMMUNICATIONS CENTER. THOUGH NOT PARTICULARLY LARGE, THE STRUCTURES IN QUESTION TOOK UP NEARLY A THIRD OF THE ASTEROID'S AREA.

- 'DEVIL KNOWS WHERE THEY'RE TAKING THEM NEXT...', RICHWATER WIPED THE SWEAT FROM HIS BROW. 'I RISK BEING COURT-

MARTIALLED IF I CONTINUE TO FOLLOW THE COMMANDER'S ORDERS, BUT IF I DISOBEY, I'LL BE COURT-MARTIALLED AGAIN!'

AFTER WALKING THROUGH A SERIES OF ROOMS, HE FINALLY MADE IT TO THE CRUISER'S STORAGE AREA. THE SMELL WAS DEFINITELY NOT PLEASANT, BUT THIS WAS A WARSHIP AFTER ALL, NOT AN AMUSEMENT PARK. HE HAD NO RIGHT TO BE PICKY ABOUT IT.

THE ADJUTANT REACHED TO RUN HIS PALM OVER THE ULTRAMODERN TOUCH-SCREEN READER ON THE HYDRONIC DOOR, BUT IT REFUSED TO OPEN AND MADE A QUIET BUT EAR-PIERCING SOUND. THAT SOUND, THERE WAS NO DOUBT, MEANT DENIAL. SWEAT TRICKLED DOWN HIS FOREHEAD AND HE DECIDED TO MAKE A SECOND ATTEMPT WHEN SOMEONE'S HAND POLITELY BUT FIRMLY TAPPED HIS SHOULDER AND PULLED HIM OUT OF THE DAZE INTO WHICH THE ANXIETY OF NOT BEING SEEN HAD DRIVEN HIM.

- EXCUSE ME, SIR, BUT YOU ARE FORBIDDEN TO BE HERE.

RICHWATER TURNED AND RECOGNIZED THE VOICE AS BELONGING TO ONE OF THE SO-CALLED GHOST WARRIORS. IN THE DIMLY LIT ROOM, THE OUTLINE OF HIS FACE WASN'T CLEARLY VISIBLE, BUT THERE WAS A SUBTLE STRAIN IN HIS VOICE.

I HAVE BEEN SENT PERSONALLY BY GENERAL GENE PAILEY ON A SECRET MISSION TO CHECK ON THE CONDITION OF THE CAPTIVES. - WINNOW LIED WITHOUT BATTING AN EYE.

THE SOLDIER WAS STUNNED, THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT, BUT APPARENTLY HESITATED AT THE MENTION OF THAT NAME, AND DID THE HONORS.

- 'SO TRUE,' HE FROZE IN PLACE.

THE GHOST WARRIOR PLACED HIS PALM ON THE TOUCH READER AND THIS TIME THE DOOR RESPONDED TO EVEN THE LIGHTEST TOUCH AND OPENED HOSPITABLY. THERE WAS AN ALMOST IMPENETRABLE DARKNESS IN THE BOTTOM OF THE WAREHOUSE, BROKEN BY THE FRAGMENTARY LIGHTS OF THE IRENIC PHOSPHORESCENT LAMPS

THAT CONSUMED NO ELECTRICITY AND COULD BURN ALMOST FOREVER. THEIR DRAWBACK WAS THAT THEY BARELY FLICKERED.

- 'SIR,' PRONOUNCED THE SOLDIER, SCARCELY AUDIBLY, 'YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO QUESTION THEM AS TO WHAT EXACTLY THEY WERE CONVICTED OF, OR AS TO THEIR IDENTITY. THAT'S TOP SECRET. I WILL PERSONALLY SUPERVISE YOUR CONVERSATION.'

RICHWATER WAS DUMBFOUNDED. HE HADN'T EXPECTED THIS TURN OF EVENTS. THE ADJUTANT STEPPED FORWARD, TRYING TO PUT AS MUCH CONFIDENCE AND GRAVITY INTO HIS GAIT AS HE COULD THAT WOULD FINALLY SUGGEST TO THE GUARD THAT HE WAS THEIR MAN. THE SOLDIER MADE WAY FOR HIM TO PASS FIRST. BUT ON CLOSER INSPECTION WINNOW'S INTENSE GAZE COULD NOT MAKE OUT THE SILHOUETTE OF EITHER PRISONER. THEY WERE SIMPLY GONE! IT WAS AS IF SOMEONE'S EXPERIENCED HAND HAD SWEEPED AND CLEANED THE CRUISER'S HOLD LIKE A SURGICAL INTERVENTION ROOM. 'SOMETHING IS WRONG HERE,' THAT THOUGHT FLASHED THROUGH HIS MIND FOR A SPLIT SECOND.

SUDDENLY, HE FELT A DEAFENING SOUND BEHIND HIM, LIKE THE IMPACT OF A BLUNT OBJECT, AND HIS GAZE REFOCUSED.

- 'THAT'S WHAT YOU GET FOR STICKING YOUR NOSE IN THE WRONG PLACE, YOU FOOL!,' WERE THE LAST WORDS HE HEARD BEFORE DARKNESS ENVELOPED HIM.

^^^

PEOPLE TEND TO DENY THE EXISTENCE OF ANY SUPERINTELLIGENCE, IMAGINING THAT EVERYTHING DEPENDS ON THEIR FREE WILL AND ESPECIALLY THEIR PERSONAL QUALITIES, BUT RESORTING TO PRAYERS FOR HELP DIRECTED TO IT IN MOMENTS OF REAL CRISIS AND TRIAL. SUCH WAS THE CASE WITH RICHWATER. HE WAS NOT MUCH OF A BELIEVER; HE DID NOT EVEN HAVE ANY RESPECT FOR RELIGION. BUT NOW ONLY SOMETHING NARROWER COULD HELP HIM. HE MENTALLY REPEATED 'GREAT MIDRIEL, PROTECTOR OF

ZEGANDARIA, PROGENITOR OF THE HUMAN RACE, SAVE ME!' THIS HASTILY CONCOCTED SEMBLANCE OF A PRAYER WAS THE BEST THAT CAME TO HIS MIND.

RAISED TO BECOME A SENIOR NAVAL OFFICER, COMING FROM AN ARISTOCRATIC FAMILY WITH A TRADITION IN THE MILITARY FIELD, HE HAD A SOMEWHAT WARPED MIND. AN EXTREME INDIVIDUALIST BY NATURE, HE HAD BECOME KENJI'S FAVORITE. BUT IT WAS NOT A CLOSE FRIENDSHIP, BUT RATHER A SYMPATHY BUILT ON THE BASIS OF A PURELY OFFICIAL RELATIONSHIP. RICHWATER HAD ALWAYS DONE HIS BEST TO BE FIRST IN EVERYTHING. HIS WHOLE LIFE SO FAR HAD BEEN BUILT ON THIS SEEMINGLY SIMPLE LIFE PRINCIPLE. TO HIM THERE WAS NOTHING BUT BLACK AND WHITE, AND THE THINGS OF LIFE, AS WE KNOW, ARE NOT ALWAYS SO. IT WAS ALSO FOR THIS THAT HE HAD SET OUT ON THE TRAIL OF THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF THE CAPTIVES, THOUGH THAT WAS NONE OF HIS BUSINESS AT ALL. AN ORDER, AFTER ALL, WAS AN ORDER.

THE ADJUTANT MOVED ABOUT THE CRAMPED ROOM. HE TRIED TO FREE HIS HANDS, A VIRTUALLY IMPOSSIBLE THING TO DO. WHATEVER THEY HAD TIED HIM UP WITH WAS DEFINITELY VERY TIGHT. THE BLURRY IMAGES BEFORE HIS EYES, ALBEIT SLOWLY, BEGAN TO CLEAR AS HE TRIED TO FOCUS HIS GAZE ON THEM. THE VOICES HE HEARD WERE QUITE HARSH, EVEN REACHING A LOW GROWL.

- 'WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT IT, CAPTAIN?,' HE MANAGED TO CATCH WITH A GREAT EFFORT.

- 'WHY DON'T WE KILL HIM RIGHT NOW? THERE'S NOTHING TO DEAL WITH. WE'RE LATE WITH THE DELIVERY ANYWAY.,' HE HEARD A FIRM MALE VOICE WITH A SLIGHTLY SQUEAKY FRENETIC NOTE.

- 'NO. A FIRM NO.,' A VOICE, A LITTLE SOFTER COMPARED TO THE OTHERS, OBJECTED. 'HE'S A VALUABLE PRISONER. AT LEAST HE'LL TELL US WHAT HE KNOWS. AND WHY SHOULDN'T HE JOIN THE COLONY'S WORKFORCE. HE WON'T BE SUPERFLUOUS. THE NEED FOR ORE MINING IS GROWING.'



THOUGH HIS HEAD WAS HEAVY, RICHWATER WAS BECOMING WELL AWARE THAT HIS SITUATION WASN'T ALL ROSY. IT WOULD BE A MIRACLE IF HE MADE IT OUT ALIVE. THE MUFFLED SHADOWS SEEMED TO STIR RESTLESSLY, APPARENTLY THEY HAD SENSED THAT HE WAS CAPABLE OF HEARING THEM. THEY APPROACHED SLOWLY AND HOVERED OVER HIM. RICHWATER WAS NO COWARD, BUT HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS AS TO WHAT WOULD FOLLOW.

THOUGH IN A BAD WAY AND WITH HIS HEAD HEAVY AND SEEMINGLY ROLLING STONES, HE MANAGED TO NOTICE THAT HE WAS NOT IN THE HOLD OF THE SHIP WHERE HE HAD BEEN ATTACKED, BUT ABOARD A SHUTTLE THAT WAS DEFINITELY NOT ONE OF THE SMALLER ONES DESIGNED FOR PURELY MILITARY PURPOSES. ITS INTERIOR WAS MUCH CLEANER THAN THE HOLD OF THE ENZORIA AND CONSIDERABLY BETTER LIT, BUT BY NO MEANS MORE COMFORTABLE.

- 'I AM DAVID PENROSE,' CAME THE SOFT, THICK MALE BASS, 'AND YOU ARE CURRENTLY ABOARD THE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE EMZIROU.'

- 'WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH ME?,' DARED RICHWATER TO ASK, NOT SO MUCH BECAUSE HE HADN'T HEARD AS TO SEE THE REACTION OF HIS CAPTORS.

- 'I THINK YOU HEARD VERY WELL A MOMENT AGO,' SMILED THE CAPTAIN. 'BUT I WANT TO ASK YOU SOMETHING TOO. WHY WOULD AN ADJUTANT, EVEN A REAR ADMIRAL, STICK HIS NOSE WHERE IT DOESN'T BELONG?'

- 'BECAUSE YOU'RE KIDNAPPING INNOCENT PEOPLE,' RICHWATER TRIED TO OBJECT, REALISING THE ABSURDITY OF HIS OWN WORDS.

- 'MY BOY,' CAPTAIN PENROSE STRETCHED HIS LIPS INTO A BROAD SMILE, 'AS A MAN OF THE ARMY YOU SHOULD KNOW WELL THAT A SOLDIER IS MERELY FOLLOWING ORDERS. MY JOB IS TO TRANSPORT THEM TO THEIR FINAL DESTINATION. AND YOU OBEY YOUR COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, DON'T TELL ME YOU DECIDED TO PURSUE US ON YOUR OWN INITIATIVE.'

- 'WHAT ABOUT THE ASTEROID YOU HAD A SHUTTLE BASE BUILT ON?,' SNAPPED RICHWATER.

- 'WHAT ASTEROID?,' SMILED CAPTAIN PENROSE WITH DELIBERATE SLYNESS.

- 'ARE YOU GOING TO DENY IT NOW?,' SAID WINNOW ANGRILY. 'AND THAT'S NOT TRUE?'

- 'I'M NOT SAYING IT ISN'T,' PENROSE CONTINUED IN HIS SOFT AND EVEN BOOMING VOICE, 'BUT YOU'LL SEE FOR YOURSELF ITS TRUE FUNCTION ONCE WE REACH OUR FINAL DESTINATION. THIS, LET'S CALL IT AN ASTEROID, JUST SERVES AS A COVER, NOT A POINT OF ATTACHMENT FOR SHUTTLES AND SHIT.'

- 'THEN WHY IS IT SO WELL GUARDED?,' STAMMERED RICHWATER, EVEN THOUGH HE KNEW THAT WITH THE CURRENT SITUATION THEY HAD HIS LIFE COMPLETELY AT THEIR DISPOSAL.

- BECAUSE EVEN A COVER NEEDS GUARDING. YOU CAN SEE FOR YOURSELF THAT WE NEED TO KEEP HIM SAFE FROM PRYING EYES.

- 'CAPTAIN, YOU'RE EXPLAINING TOO MUCH,' THE MAN WITH THE GROWLING VOICE DARED TO OBJECT, 'WHAT BUSINESS IS IT OF HIS TO KNOW ALL THIS.'

- 'NOTHING, LINUS,' CAPTAIN PENROSE TOOK UP QUITE CALMLY, 'THIS INFORMATION CAN'T HELP HIM MUCH. LET'S SATISFY HIS CURIOSITY.'

RICHWATER COULDN'T HELP BUT AGREE, HOWEVER, THAT THE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE WAS MOVING AMAZINGLY FAST. AS A MAN OF THE FLEET, HE WAS OBLIGED TO ADMIT THAT EVEN THE ENSORIA WOULD BE HARD PRESSED TO COMPETE WITH SUCH A CRAFT.

- 'WE MUST BE MOVING AT SECOND SPACE SPEED,' HE ADDED NAIVELY.

THE CREW THAT WAS THE ROOM LAUGHED. THE ADJUTANT FELT AWKWARD AND FOOLISH, FOR HE STILL WANTED TO SALVAGE SOME

OF HIS DIGNITY IN THE FACE OF THIS 'SCUM' AS HE MENTALLY REFERRED TO THE CAPTAIN AND THE OTHERS.

- 'THESE ARE SUPERMODERN TACHYON ENGINES, MY BOY. THE SPEED YOU MENTIONED IS WELL BELOW THE CAPABILITIES OF THIS MACHINE. FOR YOUR INFORMATION, WE'RE GOING ALMOST A THOUSAND TIMES FASTER,' SNEERED PENROSE.

- 'IMPOSSIBLE,' RICHWATER WAS DUMBFOUNDED. 'SO NOT EVEN KILLER WAR CRUISERS ARE CAPABLE OF DOING THAT.'

- 'YOU SEEM TO BE STUCK IN A WORLD YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, AND IT CONFUSES AND DEPRESSES YOU.,' THE CAPTAIN LAUGHED AGAIN. 'WAIT UNTIL WE REACH THE COLONY. YOU HAVEN'T SEEN ANYTHING YET.'

^^^

THE HYPERSPACE JUMP WAS SUCCESSFUL, BUT KENJI WAS BUSY WITH IMPORTANT THOUGHTS. 'WHERE WAS RICHWATER SUNK?' BECAUSE OF HIS HIGH RANK AS A MILITARY MAN, HE COULDN'T JUST GO WANDERING AROUND THE CRUISER AND LEAVE THE COMMAND ROOM UNATTENDED. THAT THOUGHT WAS DOWNRIGHT UNNATURAL. BESIDES, THE GRAVITATIONAL FIELD OF THE SHIP OUTSIDE, THE OFFICER'S BAY, AND THE PRISONER'S CELL THAT RICHWATER HAD UNWITTINGLY WITNESSED WAS QUITE WEAK, AND ONE COULD QUITE EASILY START HITTING THE WALLS LIKE A RUBBER BALL IF ONE WASN'T WEARING A SPACESUIT WITH PROGRAVETON BOOTS. ON THE OTHER HAND, HE DIDN'T HAVE ANOTHER TRUSTED PERSON TO SEND LOOKING FOR THE ADJUTANT EITHER. KENJI KNEW, HOWEVER, THAT WHATEVER HAD HAPPENED, IT WAS UNLIKELY TO HAVE BEEN DUE TO MERE COINCIDENCE. NO, THINGS LIKE THESE WERE MUCH DEEPER AND SERIOUS. EVERYTHING HAD TO HAVE SOME LOGICAL EXPLANATION, OF COURSE, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, TO THE MOST DISCERNING EYES, THIS LOGIC SEEMED SOMEHOW TOO LOGICALLY LOST AND SEEMED TO LEAD TO NOTHING. TODAY, FOR THE SECOND

TIME, HIS THOUGHTS WERE FOCUSED ON THAT VERY QUESTION, AND THAT WAS NO COINCIDENCE EITHER.

IN THAT INSTANT AN INGENNIOUS THOUGHT FLASHED INTO HIS MIND. SURE, A RANDOM WALK AROUND THE SHIP FOR A MAN OF HIS RANK WOULD BE ABSOLUTE MADNESS, BUT NOT IF HE CHECKED RICHWATER'S GAUGE. IN THE ADVANCED FUTURE, SPECIAL TRACKING SENSORS HAD BEEN ADDED TO THESE ULTRAMODERN COUNTERS, AND IF SOMEONE HAD INGESTED A HIGHER DOSE OF RADIATION THAN USUAL, THE SIGNAL SENT BY THE DEVICE STILL HAD TO BE REGISTERED. HYPERSPACE JUMPS MAY HAVE ALLOWED TWO POINTS IN SPACE TO BE DISTORTED AND SO PEOPLE COULD TRAVEL VAST DISTANCES, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND AGAINST COSMIC RADIATION MANKIND HAD GOT NO FURTHER THAN THE LEAD SCREENS USED IN THE PAST, WHICH REDUCED THE RADIATION DOSE, BUT NOT COMPLETELY. THE TRICKY PART IN THE PLAN WAS IN ONE MINOR DETAIL, WHICH HAD TO DO WITH THE PROVISION THAT NO CREW MEMBER SHOULD TURN OFF HIS GAUGE COUNTER WHILE ON WATCH.

LEAVING ASIDE THE TECHNICAL SIDE OF THE MATTER, THE MAJORITY OF THE SHIP'S CREW WAS BETWEEN TWENTY AND THIRTY YEARS OF AGE. PERSONALLY, KENJI WAS TWENTY-NINE, AND HAD JUST ABOUT MADE HIMSELF A GRANDFATHER AMONG ALL THESE YOUNGSTERS. HE KNEW THAT THIS ELEMENTARY TRICK COULD BE OF GREAT USE, BECAUSE IF SOMETHING DID HAPPEN TO RICHWATER, THERE WAS OBVIOUSLY A CHANCE THAT HE WOULD BE NEXT.

NOW THERE WAS THE SECOND PART OF THE PLAN, WHICH WAS HOW TO LEAVE THE COMMAND ROOM ON SOME PRETEXT.

CLEARLY THE CREW MEMBERS WERE BUSY WITH THEIR WORK AND ABSORBED ENOUGH TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE VARIOUS HOLOGRAPHIC INDICATIONS OF THE SHIP'S SPEED AND COURSE.

BUT THEY STILL HAD TO EXERCISE AT LEAST A LITTLE CAUTION AND ATTENTION TO DETAIL.

- ERENGALES, STAND IN FOR ME WHILE I'M GONE. ENGAGE THRUSTERS AT FULL POWER ONCE WE CLEAR THE ASTEROID BELT. BE ALERT FOR ANY AMBUSHES OR SURPRISES. PUT THE ENERGY SHIELD AT THIRTY PERCENT. PLASMA MACHINE GUNS STAND BY. PREPARE THE ON-BOARD PHOTON CANNONS JUST IN CASE, BUT ONLY THE MAIN ONES - TO THE AFT BAY AND MAIN DECK. LIVE! WE'RE FALLING BEHIND!

HILDA WAS PROBABLY THE MOST AMBITIOUS MEMBER OF THE CREW, SHE HAD COME THIS FAR BY TOOTH AND NAIL AND WAS PROBABLY THE ONLY ONE WHO WASN'T A NATIVE OF ZEGANDARIA BUT ONE OF ZEGANDARIA'S COMPANIONS, ELONTO SIBU. A SMALL ASTEROID THAT COULDN'T EVEN DEVELOP SPACE FARMING IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD DUE TO THE LACK OF SUFFICIENT SURFACE AREA. BUT IT WAS BOLD AND STUBBORN AND WANTED TO BREAK THROUGH AT ALL COSTS.

HILDA ERENGALES TOOK COMMAND OF THE SHIP AS SOON AS KENJI LEFT THE HALL. SUDDENLY SHE HAD THE POWER TO RUN THE CRUISER, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE. AS SECOND ADJUTANT, SHE HADN'T HAD A CHANCE TO PROVE HERSELF IN THAT REGARD YET, AND HER QUALITIES HAD ALWAYS REMAINED IN THE SHADOWS. NOW SHE WAS GOING TO DO HER BEST TO CATCH UP IN THAT REGARD.

KENJI LEFT THE COMMAND ROOM, FOLLOWED ONLY BY HIS PERSONAL GUARDS. BUT HE WANTED TO BE LEFT ALONE, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE, AND NOT BECAUSE HE COULDN'T WAIT TO CHECK HIS ADJUTANT'S GAIGER COUNTER. HE WANTED TO BE SURE IF THE SHIP WAS CAPTURED, BUT THE CONQUERORS WERE STILL SOMEHOW CUNNINGLY HIDING, AND BEHIND THE FALSE CALM ALL AROUND, DISASTER WOULD STRIKE AT ANY MOMENT. OF COURSE TIME WAS RUNNING OUT...

AAA

KENJI WAS GRIPPED BY FEARS FOR HIS OWN SAFETY. AND DECIDED TO LOOK FOR RICHWATER. BUT AFTER NOT FINDING HIM, HE REALIZED THAT THE SITUATION WAS EVEN WORSE THAN BEFORE. PASSING THROUGH THE CORRIDORS, HE ENCOUNTERED ABSOLUTELY NO ONE. 'ANYWAY - I'M NOT GOING TO RISK GOING TO THE BAY WITH THE PRISONERS. I'LL CHECK THE ESCAPE SHUTTLES FIRST!' HE GROPED HIS WAY DOWN THE CORRIDOR, TRYING TO MAINTAIN SOME DIGNITY. THIS WAS HIS LAST CHANCE TO SURVIVE! 'LET HILDA ENJOY THE POWER ENTRUSTED TO HER!,' HE THOUGHT AGAIN. 'HER REIGN WILL NOT LAST LONG!' THEN HE SLOWLY MADE HIS WAY TO A PART OF THE SHIP KNOWN ONLY TO HIM. BEHIND THE COMMAND ROOM, WERE THE SERVICE CORRIDORS, AND BELOW THE LOWER BRIDGE, A SINTERED HATCH THAT NO ONE WOULD HAVE NOTICED WITH THE NAKED EYE. IT WAS SO NONDESCRIPT AND HIDDEN AS TO BE SIMPLY EXPENSIVE. KENJI TURNED THE VALVE CAREFULLY, AND THE HATCH SLOWLY OPENED. HE PUSHED HIMSELF IN RATHER DEFTLY AND CLOSED IT. EVERYTHING WAS FALLING INTO PLACE AS THERE WAS A WEAPONS CACHE HIDDEN IN THERE SOMEWHERE. AS HE CRAWLED THROUGH THE GUT-LIKE TUNNEL OF THE SQUADRON, HE COULD DEFINITELY IMAGINE THE FOOD GOING THROUGH THE MAN'S BODY TO ITS EXIT ON THE OUTSIDE. A MOMENT LATER HE WAS IN THE CORRESPONDING CACHE THE SIZE OF A SMALL ROOM. THERE WAS A PARTICULAR KIND OF WEAPONRY IN THERE. SOME OF THEM WERE QUITE INTERESTING IN BOTH FORM AND FUNCTION. HE PUT ON A SPECIAL COMBAT SUIT THAT WOULD PROTECT HIS BODY WHEN HE WAS FORCED INTO THE SPACE CAPSULE. HE THEN RETRIEVED HIS WEAPON AND CHECKED THE CHARGES ON THE PLASMA BLASTER. EVERYTHING WAS ACCURATE. EVERYTHING BUT ONE. IT WAS BEST NOT TO FIND OUT HE'D LEFT THE SHIP AT ALL. HE HAD TO BE CAREFUL. HE DID HIS BEST TO ERASE ALL POSSIBLE TRACES. EVERY MOVEMENT WAS WELL MEASURED. THERE WAS NO ROOM FOR IMPROVISATION. THEN HE MENTALLY PRAYED THAT THE SHOT WOULD BE SUCCESSFUL AND SOMEHOW GET THROUGH THE SHIP'S SHIELD. TWO THINGS WERE NECESSARY FOR

THAT PURPOSE. FIRST HE HAD TO SHUT IT DOWN. HE HAD TO GO BACK DOWN THE GUT. AND TO GO TO A DIFFERENT BAY, BUT ONE THAT WAS HEAVILY GUARDED. HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT HE WAS UNLIKELY TO STOP THE GUARDS WITH SOME SORT OF BLASTER. THESE WERE TRAINED GHOST WARRIORS WHO WERE BETTER THAN EVEN HIM. BUT NOT SMARTER. OR SO HE HOPED. HE WAS GOING TO SHOW THEM WHAT A REAR ADMIRAL COULD DO!

HE HAD PICKED UP THE FIRST SPECIAL WEAPON, WHICH WAS CALLED A THERMOFLON TORCH. HE WAS GOING TO MELT THEM WITH IT. THE ENTIRE CORRIDOR WAS UNDER VIDEO SURVEILLANCE, SO HE USED A SPECIAL NANOSUIT TO HIDE IT EVEN FROM THE INFRARED SENSORS.

HE WENT BACK AND WALKED RATHER BOLDLY THROUGH THE CRUISER'S STORES. WHAT WAS HIS SURPRISE WHEN HE FOUND ABSOLUTELY NOTHING AND NO ONE! THAT PUZZLED HIM EVEN MORE. AS CRUSHED AS HE WAS, HE WENT BACK TO THE COMMAND ROOM. WASN'T THIS SOME KIND OF HOAX!

HE TRIED OPENING THE MASSIVE TRIPLE HYDRON DOOR. NO RESULT! HE TRIED AGAIN! SAME AGAIN! THE DOOR SEEMED TO HAVE TWISTED AND WOULDN'T BUDGE. HE PLACED HIS PALM ON THE TOUCH READER. NOTHING!

DECIDED TO USE THE BURNER! THE STRONG FIERY BLAST OF THE POWERFUL WEAPON WASHED OVER HIM! HE COULD JUST FEEL THAT HE WAS IN THE MIDST OF SOME KIND OF MAROON AS THE DOOR CAME DOWN IN LAYERS LIKE SOME KIND OF HALF-HARDENED SLAG. HE DEFINITELY WANTED TO GIVE UP, BUT HE COULDN'T AS THE SUDDEN CHANGE IN TEMPERATURE COULD BE DANGEROUS AND EVEN CAUSE AN EXPLOSION. HE STOOD AT SUCH AN ANGLE THAT THE SLAG PASSED BY HIM. IT TOOK QUITE A WHILE. BUT IN THE END KENJI HAD TO ADMIT WITH PRIDE THAT HE WAS MORE OF A TEST THAN THE DOOR. AT LEAST IN THEORY. FIFTEEN MINUTES HAD PASSED. THE HOLE IN THE MIDDLE OF THE DOOR WAS MEDIUM-SIZED, BUT HE COULD SQUEEZE HIS ATHLETIC BODY THROUGH IT. WITH AN EXCELLENTLY PRACTICED LEAP, HE DOVE AND WENT THROUGH THE OPENING, AIMING THE TORCH IN HIS DIRECTION. IT WAS AN IDIOTIC

CONTRAPTION! THERE COULD HAVE BEEN A WHOLE PLATOON OF WARRIORS ON THE OTHER SIDE. BUT AGAIN THERE WAS NO ONE!

TOO STRANGE! HE LOOKED AROUND! THE SENSORS AND NANO-SCREENS WERE OFF, AND NOTHING COULD BE SEEN THROUGH THE HUGE HOOD OF REINFORCED ENDOSIAN. IT WAS ALSO CLOUDED OVER.

ONE THING WAS CERTAIN - THE SHIP WASN'T MOVING! OR SO IT SEEMED TO HIM!

- 'ECHO, IS ANYONE THERE?', HE CALLED OUT SHORTLY.

NO REPLY FOLLOWED. KENJI UNDERSTOOD. THEY HAD KIDNAPPED THE CREW. ONLY HE HAD MIRACULOUSLY ESCAPED. BUT WHERE HAD THEY GONE. NOW HE WAS ALONE ON THE SHIP.

- 'HILDA, ALWAYS DREAMING OF TAKING MY PLACE. HERE NOW SHE HAS TAKEN IT!,' HE JOKED, WITH RATHER CAUSTIC BLACK HUMOUR. PITY THERE WAS NO ONE TO HEAR HIM!

KENJI WALKED ROUND AND LOOKED ROUND EVERY CORNER. THERE WERE NO SCRATCHES, NO PLASMA MARKS, LET ALONE BLOOD OR EXPLOSIONS. JUST IN CASE, HE TURNED AND LOOKED THROUGH THE HOLE AGAIN. NATURALLY, THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. NO FOOTSTEPS COULD BE HEARD FROM THE CLATTERING NANOBOTS. IT HAD JUST BEEN A STORM, AND HE HAD SAVED HIMSELF. THE CREW OF NEARLY TWO HUNDRED SEEMED TO HAVE EVAPORATED.

BUT THE QUESTION REMAINED, WHERE WAS THE SHIP ACTUALLY? AND WHO HAD HIJACKED IT? KENJI HAD HIS SUSPICIONS THAT IT MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN THE ELOHYNs EXACTLY. IT WASN'T THEIR STYLE TO ACT QUITE SO PRECISE. WAS IT ANOTHER RACE? OR SOME SORT OF SUPERBEING?

WERE THEY STUCK IN SOME SORT OF SPACE-TIME ANOMALY? HE KNEW VERY WELL THE PROPERTIES OF THE SO-CALLED GRAVITATIONAL SINGULARITY THAT WAS SO CHARACTERISTIC OF BLACK HOLES. THERE, THE CONTINUITY OF SPACE-TIME WAS



BROKEN. BUT THERE WAS NOTHING LIKE THAT HERE. IT SHOULD BY THAT LOGIC NO LONGER EXIST, ALONG WITH THE WHOLE SHIP.

THAT WAS OBVIOUS.

AFTER HIS BRAIN KEPT JUMPING FROM ONE HYPOTHESIS TO ANOTHER, HE WAS IN AGREEMENT WITH ONLY ONE THING. HE COULDN'T STAY HERE EVEN A SECOND LONGER. HE RETURNED TO THE SHUTTLE BAY. FORTUNATELY, THERE WAS NO PROBLEM WITH THEM. AT LEAST THEY WERE IN PLACE. HE POKED AT ONE OF THEM A LITTLE NERVOUSLY. AND JUST SHUT THE HATCH TIGHTLY. THE LAUNCHER SQUEAKED SLIGHTLY AS THE SMALL ESCAPE VEHICLE UNHOOKED FROM THE SILO SLID INTO OPEN SPACE. BETTER THERE THAN ALONE IN THAT GHOST SHIP! HE DIDN'T NEED HIS CAPTAIN ANYMORE!

THE SHUTTLE MADE ITS WAY AMIDST THE ENDLESS EXPANSE! IT LOOKED LIKE A SMALL BRIGHT DOT THAT FINALLY DISAPPEARED ALTOGETHER. THE ENSORIA CONTINUED TO FLOAT IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE, LIKE SOME COLOSSUS DEVOID OF LIFE.

THE FEELING OF FLYING IN A SHUTTLE IN THE ABSOLUTE DARK VACUUM OF OUTER SPACE WAS INCOMPARABLE. KENJI JUST STOOD THERE PEACEFULLY, FEELING LIKE HE WAS IN SOME SORT OF SLED. HE'D SEEN A PICTURE LIKE THIS IN AN E-BOOK LONG AGO. THEN HE CLEARLY REALIZED THAT HE WAS AT THE MERCY OF FATE. THE SHUTTLE WAS EQUIPPED WITH SPARE OXYGEN CAPSULES AND HAD AUTONOMY FOR UP TO THREE DAYS, BUT AFTER THAT ITS FUEL WOULD RUN OUT AND THE CRAFT WOULD JUST FLOAT AWAY IN OPEN SPACE LIKE A LITTLE SPECK OF DUST. KENJI REALIZED THAT HE MIGHT HAVE MADE A MISTAKE, BUT WHOEVER THE HIJACKERS WERE, THEY HAD OBVIOUSLY TAKEN EVERYTHING ON THE SHIP THAT WAS EDIBLE, AND THAT MEANT STARVATION. NOT THAT THE RATIONS OF THE CRUISER'S PERSONNEL WERE PLENTIFUL, QUITE THE CONTRARY, BUT AT LEAST THERE WAS SOMETHING TO EAT.

KENJI SET THE SHUTTLE INTO HIBERNATION MODE, AS IT COULD LAST LONGER THAT WAY. HE HOPED SOME SHIP WOULD FIND IT AND

RESCUE HIM. IF NOT, IT WOULD SINK INTO ETERNAL OBLIVION. IT WAS NOT A ROMANTIC DEATH, BUT A RATHER UNFORTUNATE END. BUT SOMETIMES FATE LIKED TO PLAY PRANKS. AND MURDEROUS ONES AT THAT!

THERE WAS NO WAY TO IGNORE THE FACT THAT KENJI MIGHT HAVE DIED EARLIER. SOMEHOW HE HAD HIT THE MOMENT TO LEAVE THE COMMAND ROOM. FOR BETTER OR WORSE, IT HAD TURNED OUT TO BE THE RIGHT SPUR OF THE MOMENT DECISION. 'HILDA WANTED THIS SHIP, AND SHE COULDN'T RESIGN HERSELF TO THE POSITION OF SECOND ADJUTANT!,' HE THOUGHT. 'AND I BELIEVED I WAS DOING SOMETHING JUST AND GOOD! WHAT A BLIND MAN I WAS! AND WHAT A FOOL! THESE MEN DIED PERHAPS THROUGH MY FAULT. BUT AT LEAST I GOT THE SKIN OFF! NOT THAT THAT'S MUCH TO BRAG ABOUT! THIS SHUTTLE MAY SOON BE MY TOMB. OXYGEN IS EXTREMELY LIMITED. I'LL START BREATHING FROM TIME TO TIME TO CONSERVE IT! BUT EVEN THAT WON'T HELP ME FOR LONG. BEST NOT TO THINK AT ALL. THE BRAIN CONSUMES ABOUT ONE-FIFTH OF THE BODY'S ENERGY, WHICH IN PRACTICE WOULD MEAN THAT I WOULD BE AT AN EXTREME DISADVANTAGE IF I INDULGED IN THOUGHTS. NO, I'LL JUST STAY AND DO NOTHING!'

STRANGE ROCK FORMATIONS FLEW PAST THE SHUTTLE AND COULD SMASH IT TO PIECES, AND BESIDES, THE RADIATION RADIATION WAS NOT TO BE IGNORED EITHER. THERE WAS ONE MORE THING, THE NANOSUIT PROTECTED ITS OWNER FROM SOME HARMFUL EFFECTS, BUT THE RADIATION STILL HAD ITS EFFECT. EVEN IN THE FACE OF THE SHUTTLE'S DEFENSES AND THE SIXTEEN-LAYER NANOSUIT MADE OF ADVANCED BIOPOLYMERS, IT WOULD SLOWLY CREEP IN UNTIL IT REACHED CRITICAL LEVELS.

BUT SUDDENLY SOME STRANGE OBJECT FLASHED IN THE DISTANCE. KENJI STRAINED TO SEE IT. THERE WAS DEFINITELY SOMETHING THERE. HE ACTIVATED THE ISOMETRON NANOBINOCULAR, WHICH WAS AN ADVANCED VERSION OF THE INFRARED ONE. IT GAVE MANY TIMES THE MAGNIFICATION AND HAD FILTERS TO PROTECT THE EYE FROM HARMFUL GLARE. WHAT A SIGHT! THIS THING WAS DEFINITELY

MOVING TOWARDS THE SHUTTLE, AND AT AN EVER-INCREASING SPEED.

- 'DOESN'T LOOK LIKE A CRUISER TO ME, OR A SHUTTLE, OR EVEN THE REMAINS OF A SPACE SATELLITE,' HE MUTTERED, BARELY AUDIBLY.

NOW A KIND OF FRENZY CAME OVER HIM. SOME WILD RAGE THAT THREATENED TO EAT HIM FROM THE INSIDE.

- 'JUST DON'T LET IT PASS ME BY!,' HE SCREAMED, NOT CARING MUCH THAT NO ONE WOULD OR COULD HEAR HIM.

THE BRIGHT THING KEPT COMING TOWARDS HIM, TAKING ON CLEARER OUTLINES. NO DOUBT THEY WOULD SOON COLLIDE. BUT WHEN - IT WAS HARD TO SAY, AND EVEN HARDER TO PREDICT. THE SPEED OF THE OBJECT IN QUESTION WAS INCREASING WAS INCREASING.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: HANS

HANS AUSLANDER WAS A VERY STRANGE AND SLIGHTLY REPULSIVE MAN WHO AT THE SAME TIME POSSESSED A KIND OF ATTRACTION AND MAGNETISM. EVERYTHING AROUND HIM MOVED TO A PARTICULAR RHYTHM THAT HE LIKED TO SET. HANS'S APPEARANCE WAS NO DIFFERENT FROM THAT OF OTHER YOUNG MEN HIS AGE. HE HAD POLITE MANNERS AND WORE GLASSES WITH QUANTUM NANO-STICKS. THE YOUNG MAN HAD OPTED TO STUDY COMPUTER SCIENCE, BUT LATER GRADUATED WITH A DEGREE IN WORMHOLES AND QUANTUM MECHANICS, WHICH WAS THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS AT HIS CHOSEN INSTITUTION. HE WAS ALWAYS FIRST AMONG THE OTHERS. BUT SOMEWHERE DEEP IN HIS HEART HE WAS AWARE THAT SOMETHING INSIDE HIM WAS NOT LIKE THE OTHERS. HE HAD PRINCIPLES AND BELIEFS THAT HE FOLLOWED CONTRARY TO THE ACCEPTED NORMS. AND THAT WAS WHY HE FOUND IT VERY DIFFICULT TO PROGRESS IN LIFE. IF AT ALL WE CAN CALL HIS

PATHETIC ATTEMPTS TO DRAG HIMSELF FORWARD 'PROGRESSING'. LIKE SOMEONE WARY OF FALLING VICTIM TO AN ACCIDENTAL STRAY PLASMA SLOPE. HANS DIDN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS, NOR DID HIS SO-CALLED ACQUAINTANCES HAVE MUCH IN COMMON WITH HIM. HIS GENIUS LIVED LIKE A COCOON. HE WAS TOO WILLFUL BY CONVENTIONAL NORMS. HE LOVED TO TEACH HIS CLASSMATES, WHILE SOMEWHERE INSIDE HIM EVERYTHING WAS TURNING UPSIDE DOWN, AND HE WAS LOOKING FOR NEW WAYS TO SATISFY THAT ARDOR! TRY AS HE MIGHT, HE WAS TRYING TO SURVIVE! SO MANY TIMES HE HAD STARTED SOME NEW VENTURE THAT LOOKED TOO PROMISING, BUT IN VAIN - IT ALWAYS TURNED OUT NOT TO BE RIGHT FOR HIM. IN SPIKE OF EVERYTHING ELSE, HE DIDN'T STOP TRYING, BECAUSE SOONER OR LATER HE FELT THAT HIS TIME WOULD COME. HE JUST HAD TO WAIT PATIENTLY. AND TO HOPE.

HIS ADMISSION TO THE CADET SCHOOL WAS ALSO A VERY INTERESTING PART OF HIS LIFE, WHERE HE SEEMED TO FEEL, FOR A VERY SHORT TIME, LIKE PART OF SOME KIND OF SOCIAL COMMUNITY. BUT THAT WAS ONLY WHILE HE WAS A CADET. HE WAS EXCELLENT AT IMITATING ANY KIND OF CONFORMITY. SOMETHING IN PRACTICE - VERY USEFUL FOR HIS SURVIVAL IN AN UNFAMILIAR ENVIRONMENT. ALTHOUGH THE WELL-CONTROLLED AND REGULATED CLOSED COMMUNITY OF THE CAMPUS AND THE TEACHING STAFF COULD HARDLY BE A MODEL OF REAL SOCIETY.

HE HAD ALWAYS SHIED AWAY FROM FRIENDS AND LOUD PARTIES AND REVELS. HE WAS A LONE WOLF. BUT THAT WAS WHY HIS WORK WAS WELL DONE. NO, IT WAS MORE ACCURATE TO SAY THAT IT WAS PERFECTLY DONE.

AS SOON AS HE GRADUATED, HE EXPRESSED HIS OVERWHELMING DESIRE TO SEE THE STARS. BACK THEN, THAT WAS MORE EXOTIC THAN PRAGMATIC FOR MOST YOUNG PEOPLE IN THEIR CAREER CHOICE. THE ZEGANDARIA SOCIETY WAS PERPLEXED AS TO WHY THEY SHOULD BOTHER WITH WORMHOLES WHEN IT WAS SOLELY THE JOB OF THE MILITARY. BUT HANS KNEW THERE WERE OTHER WAYS TO ACHIEVE HIS CHERISHED DREAM. HE WAS MORE THAN SINGLE-

MINDED. AT FIRST HE WAS NOT ALLOWED NEAR ANY AIRCRAFT, BUT THEN THE SITUATION CHANGED. AND HE SOMEHOW WON A VERY IMPORTANT COMPETITION FOR A NEW MODEL ISORENDER. THE DISCOVERY WAS NOT WITHOUT THE SYMPATHY OF MANY IMPORTANT PEOPLE WHO, FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON, STOOD UP FOR HIM AND JUST GAVE HIM A CHANCE. A CHANCE TO SHOW WHAT HE CAN DO BEST. AND HE LIVED UP TO EXPECTATIONS.

HAPLOID HYDRAULICS POWERING A NANOSUIT MADE OF COMPOSITES WAS SOMETHING ASTOUNDINGLY IMPRESSIVE - EVEN MORE SO FOR A FRESHLY GRADUATED CADET. AUSLANDER HAD DONE A BRILLIANT JOB. INWARDLY, HE KNEW THAT IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR THE AFOREMENTIONED PROTECTION, HE WOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ALLOWED TO COME THIS FAR.

BUT HANS DIDN'T GET UPPITY, HE CONTINUED TO WORK TIRELESSLY AND GIVE HIS BEST. UNTIL HE MADE IT ABOARD THE ENZORIA.

SOME WOULD SAY THAT HANS AUSLANDER WAS A DIRTY TRAITOR. A SNEAKY, CUNNING AND CALCULATING CAREERIST. BUT SOMEWHERE DEEP IN HIS SOUL HE KNEW THAT WASN'T THE CASE. THE YOUNG MAN CARRIED A SAMURAI MENTALITY AND COULD ONLY SERVE ONE MASTER. EVERY DISCONNECTION DROVE HIM MAD. AND SOMEWHERE DOWN THERE, EVERYONE COULD DIE. HE WAS WELL AWARE THAT HE WAS DOING HIS DUTY RATHER THAN COMMITTING OUTRIGHT TREASON. THE GOVERNOR WAS HIS SUPERIOR, NOT KENJI AND HIS VAUNTED CREW. EVEN BEFORE THE HYPERSPACE JUMP, VERY DISTURBING REPORTS HAD REACHED HIS EARS. AND THEY WOULD ALL LEAD TO HIM SOONER OR LATER. THAT MUCH WAS CLEAR. HE HAD TO DO SOME WORK AND MANAGE TO SURVIVE. THE OBVIOUSNESS OF THE FACT THAT KENJI HAD NEVER PERFORMED THE HYPERDISTANCE JUMPS WITHOUT HELP FROM ANOTHER WOULD PLAY A KEY ROLE. YES, HE WAS EXPERIENCED, BUT HE NEEDED SOME SUBTLETIES AS THE AREA OF ERMUK SOR WAS TOO SPECIFIC. ENZORIA NEEDED TO REACH THE COLONY, BUT NOT BEFORE GOING THROUGH A THIRD-DEGREE WORMHOLE DISTORTION OF SPACE, SOMETHING FAR TOO COMPLEX. TACHYON ENGINES, ACCORDING TO

PHYSICS, WERE DIVIDED INTO THOSE OF FIRST, SECOND, AND THIRD DEGREE. TO PASS THROUGH A THIRD-DEGREE WORMHOLE, THE SHIP SIMPLY NEEDED AN ENGINE OF THE SAME DEGREE. THIS MISTAKE WAS MADE BY MANY OF THE CREWS WHO TRAVELED INTO THE UNKNOWN SPACE WILDS OF ERMUK SOR. THIS AREA HAD TAKEN TOO MANY CASUALTIES AND MANY CREWS HAD GONE MISSING IN THEIR ATTEMPTS TO TRAVERSE THIS DEAD ZONE. KENJI WAS A YOUNG REAR ADMIRAL, AN EXCELLENT PILOT AND KARATE PLAYER, BUT TOO POORLY PREPARED FOR THIS KIND OF TRAVEL.

SOMEWHERE DEEP DOWN, AUSLANDER FELT THAT HE HAD TO GAIN THE CONFIDENCE THAT HE COULD WIN AN UNEQUAL FIGHT WITH HIS OPPONENT - THAT WAS WHY HE HAD BEEN RECRUITED BY ELMBAUM.

'IN THE END, YOU WILL ALL BE GONE AND ONLY HUSKS IN MORTAL FORM WILL REMAIN!,' MENTALLY CHIDED AUSLANDER, 'AND I WILL HAVE SIMPLY COMPLETED THE TASK!'

WHEN HIS SHIFT CAME, HE PREPARED TO CARRY OUT HIS DASTARDLY SCHEME AND WIN IN A DESPERATE RACE AGAINST TIME.

DOUBTS WERE FURTHER RAISED WHEN HE TRIED TO BOARD WITH A FAKE NARENZIUM CHIP. HE HAD TO CONVINCE THE CREW AT LENGTH THAT HE WAS A SECOND EXTRA SET TO THE REGULAR CREW AND THAT HE WAS A NARROW SPECIALIST IN WORMHOLE DISTORTIONS OF SPACE AND QUANTUM MECHANICS.

THE VAST KNOWLEDGE HE DEMONSTRATED OPENED THE PLACE UP FOR HIM ALL TOO EASILY, BUT HE ALSO HAD TO FIGHT FOR A KIND OF SOCIAL RECOGNITION FROM THE OTHER CREW MEMBERS AFTERWARDS. IT WASN'T EASY AT ALL. IN THE END THE OTHER CREW MEMBERS ACCEPTED HIM AS ONE OF THEM ANYWAY.

THEY ALL THOUGHT OF HIM AS A ROOKIE, BUT HE KNEW THE EFFORT HE HAD MADE TO EARN HIS PLACE AMONG THE OTHERS. HE DECIDED TO FIGHT WITH ALL HIS MIGHT.

SOON HE ROSE TO THE RANK OF A FRONT-LINE OPERATOR AND EXPECTATIONS GREW. EVEN KENJI WAS IMPRESSED BY THE DEEP

UNDERSTANDING HE HAD OF THE PRINCIPLES OF SPACE. SOMEWHERE IN THE BACK OF HIS MIND, HE COULD VAGUELY HEAR SOMEONE OR SOMETHING TRYING TO OPEN HIS EYES THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THIS MAN. KENJI WAS EITHER BLIND OR HE WAS DEAF. HE DIDN'T LISTEN TO HIS INNER VOICE.

GREAT CARE HAD TO BE TAKEN BEFORE A COLLAPSAR JUMP WAS MADE, AS THE SHIP COULD EASILY FALL INTO WHAT WAS CALLED A LATENCY HOLE. ACCORDING TO SUPERLUMINAL PROPULSION PRINCIPLES, A SO-CALLED BUBBLE OF SPECIAL SPACE WAS USED, WHICH DID NOT MOVE, BUT SIMPLY MOVED AT THE EXPENSE OF DISTORTING SPACE. BUT WHAT COULD HAPPEN IF THE BUBBLE BURST, OR TO PUT IT ANOTHER WAY ITS INTEGRITY WAS VIOLATED?

AUSLANDER'S GOAL WAS TO CREATE CONDITIONS THAT WOULD DISRUPT PROPER ENTRY INTO THE TIME TUNNEL. WOULD ANYONE HAVE FELT? NATURALLY, YES, BUT IN PRACTICE, HE WOULD HAVE 'WIGGLED' OUT OF THE INSTRUCTIONS AT THE LAST MINUTE. HE MIGHT HAVE PERISHED, BUT WOULDN'T HISTORY REMEMBER HIS DEEDS! OR SO HE HOPED!

BEFORE BOARDING THE ENZORIA, HE HAD STUDIED ALL POSSIBLE EVACUATION PLANS FOR THE CREW ALL TOO THOROUGHLY. EVERYTHING INVOLVED IN THE CAREFUL EXECUTION OF HIS PLAN HAD BEEN TAKEN INTO CONSIDERATION. HE WAS ALL TOO AWARE THAT THE CYCLICAL DISTORTIONS INVOLVED WOULD PUSH THE SHIP FORWARD. HE HAD ONLY TO UPSET THE CORRECT BALANCE BETWEEN MATTER AND ENERGY. NOTHING MORE!

AUSLANDER WAS WELL AWARE THAT IN ORDER TO CREATE THE SO-CALLED CONTRACTION AT THE FRONT OF THE BLADDER, THE GRAVITATIONAL FIELD GENERATED BY THE OBJECT HAD TO BE STRONG ENOUGH. ON THE OTHER HAND, THE EXPANSION OF THE SPACE BEHIND THE OBJECT REQUIRED ANOTHER PREREQUISITE, WHICH WAS RELATED TO SO-CALLED NEGATIVE MATTER. HE SIMPLY CONSIDERED TO BREAK THE SYNCHRONICITY BETWEEN MATTER AND ANTIMATTER IN CREATING THE BUBBLE. AND HE MANAGED TO DO IT.

WHEN THE SHIP BEGAN TO CONCENTRATE ENERGY AROUND ITSELF, AS THE FIRST LINE OPERATOR IN MAKING THE HYPERSPACE JUMP, HE DECIDED TO CHANGE SOME OF THE INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE TACHYON ACCELERATOR AND SET THE THIRD STAGE TACHYON ENGINE TO OPERATE AS A SECOND STAGE ONE. HE WASN'T SURE IF THAT WOULD HAVE UPSET THE BALANCE AT ALL, SINCE HE'D NEVER DONE IT. IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN THE STUPIDEST THING HE'D EVER DONE. STILL, THE CHANGE IN ACCELERATION JOLTED THE SHIP IN A WAY THAT COULDN'T HELP BUT BE FELT.

THE CREW, LED BY DOUG ENLOW WAS GIVING IT THEIR BEST SHOT, BUT NO ONE NOTICED THE SMALL CHANGE IN INSTRUCTIONS. ACCORDING TO HER, THE SWITCH TO SECOND STAGE WOULD ONLY BE FOR A SHORT TIME UNTIL THE MATTER AND ANTIMATTER LEVELS WERE CLOSE TO EACH OTHER. AT THE LAST MOMENT, IT WOULD SWITCH TO THIRD DEGREE, JUST BEFORE ENTERING THE COLLAPSAR TUNNEL. HOWEVER, THAT NEVER HAPPENED. THERE WAS IMMENSE CONFUSION ON BOARD AND EVERYONE WAS WONDERING WHAT WAS REALLY GOING ON. BUT ONLY ONE PERSON KNEW THE ANSWER FOR SURE! AND THAT MAN WAS HANS AUSLANDER! THE ROOKIE WHO HAD EVERYONE IN THE PALM OF HIS HAND. THAT INCLUDED HILDA EHRENGEILS. NOW HIS MOMENT HAD COME!

HILDA WAS ON THE BRIDGE GIVING HER ORDERS. SHE WAS NOW IN HER ELEMENT AND WANTED TO USE THIS ONE OPPORTUNITY TO SHINE AND IMPRESS THE WHOLE CREW. PERHAPS SOONER OR LATER SHE WOULD RISE TO THE RANK OF FIRST ADJUTANT TO THE REAR ADMIRAL. THAT WAS WHAT SHE WANTED WITH ALL HER HEART. SHE PRAYED TO SOME UNKNOWN HIGHER POWER THAT SHE WOULD HAVE AT LEAST A LITTLE LUCK. ALL THIS COULD TIP THE SCALES IN HER DIRECTION.

THE COMMAND ROOM WAS DIVIDED INTO THREE MAIN COMPARTMENTS - COMMAND AND CONTROL, WEAPONS AND RADAR. NOW COORDINATION BETWEEN THEM WAS MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANYTHING. WHERE WITH DIFFICULTY, WHERE WITH LUCK, THEY HAD TO OVERCOME THE TIME-SPACE DISTORTION.



HILDA CAME DOWN THE BRIDGE AND GAVE FURTHER ORDERS TO DOUG ENLOW:

- THERE ARE NO QUASARS AROUND, NOR ANY OTHER OBJECTS SUCH AS ASTEROIDS TO PULL US TOWARD THEM AND OFF COURSE. BE CAREFUL WITH ANY OTHER INFORMATION YOU GET FROM THE OUTSIDE. I WANT YOU TO LOOK TO ME FOR CONFIRMATION.

- 'SO TRUE,' DOUG BELLOWED AS IF HE WERE ON A FITZGERALD.

- WE HAVE TO BE VERY CAREFUL WITH THE TACHYON ENGINE STAGES. 'THEY CAN SUCKER US,' HE RETORTED IMMEDIATELY.

HILDA KNEW HE WAS RIGHT. BUT WHO KNEW THE MOST ABOUT THE MATTER IN THAT RESPECT. IT COULD ONLY AND ONLY BE HANS AUSLANDER. BUT WHERE HAD HE GONE?

HILDA FIXED HER GAZE ON A SMALL FIGURE WHO WAS TALKING INTENTLY TO SOME OF THE CREW, BUT SEEMED TO BE MOVING FARTHER AND FARTHER AWAY AND SOMEHOW HEADING FOR THE COMMAND ROOM DOOR.

- WHY ISN'T HE IN THE OPERATOR'S CABIN, SHE WONDERED. A MOMENT LATER SHE REALIZED WHAT WAS HAPPENING. 'TRAITOR!' SHE ROARED AT THE TOP OF HER LUNGS. 'VILE SCOUNDREL!'

HANS AUSLANDER STARTED TO RUN, CONSCIOUS OF HIS ALMOST FUTILE ATTEMPTS TO SLIP AWAY. THEY WERE GOING TO CATCH HIM. THEN EVERYTHING SHUDDERED, TURNED WHITE AND DISAPPEARED. THE SHIP WAS LOST FOREVER. THE MOMENT KENJI LEFT THE COMPARTMENTS AND FLEW OUT INTO OPEN SPACE WITH THE SHUTTLE WAS A LIFESAVER FOR HIM, BUT HOW HAD HE ACTUALLY SLIPPED AWAY? SIMPLY, ON AUSLANDER'S FIRST ATTEMPT, WHICH WAS UNSUCCESSFUL, HE WAS ALREADY DOWN THE CENTRAL CORRIDOR, WHICH WAS LOCATED JUST PAST MID-SHIP. THE CREW AT THE FRONT OF THE SHIP, SPECIFICALLY THE COMMAND ROOM, HAD BEEN SUCKED INTO THE TIME-SPACE TUNNEL AND DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE. AUSLANDER WAS ALSO NO LONGER ON BOARD, AS HE TOO WAS IN THE SAME COMMAND ROOM. WHEN KENJI HAD

RETURNED WITH THE BURNER, THE SIMPLE CHANGE OF ENGINE STAGE HAD CAUSED SOMETHING LIKE A TEMPORARY 'KNOCKBACK'. KENJI WAS LUCKY HE HADN'T BEEN STUCK IN THE COMMAND ROOM FOR TOO LONG WHILE CONDUCTING HIS IMPROMPTU INVESTIGATION.

A MOMENT LATER, THE REAR ADMIRAL DISTINCTLY FELT THE SHIP SHUDDER. BUT THE SHIP WAS NOT YET COMPLETELY SUCKED IN. THE TIME-SPACE TUNNEL HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO CLOSE WHEN THE LEVEL OF GRAVITY SUDDENLY GENERATED BY THE SHIP'S QUANTILION REACTOR REACHED THE MINIMUM REQUIRED LIMIT. IN THAT TIME OF ALMOST FIFTEEN MINUTES, KENJI HAD MANAGED TO MAKE IT TO THE ESCAPE POD. TO HIS VERY GREAT GOOD FORTUNE! AND WE KNOW THE REST OF THE STORY!

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN: VICTORY

ZARAG TU, THE MOST BLOODTHIRSTY OF THE GUARRON CHIEFTAINS, ENTERED THE DIOMEDES BASE IN THE LEARNIA DISTRICT WITH THE SELF-CONFIDENCE OF A CONQUEROR AND CONQUEROR, WHICH IN FACT HE WAS. HIS DIGNIFIED BEARING SUGGESTED FROM AFAR HIS ROYAL ORIGINS. HIS HEAVY FORGED ARMOR OF ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE GLEAMED DAZZLINGLY UNDER THE SCORCHING RAYS OF THE SUN, AND HIS CAPE SPATTERED UNDER THE FORCE OF THE WIND. EVEN THE WAY HE HELD THE REINS OF HIS GROANDUS BETRAYED A THREAT, TO ANYONE WHO DARED TO REBEL AGAINST HIS AUTHORITY.

ACCORDING TO THE ANCIENT TRADITIONS OF THIS RACE, NO ONE HAD THE RIGHT TO CHALLENGE HIS CONQUESTS. IT WAS DIFFICULT FOR THE PEOPLE TO REALIZE THE PRINCIPLES OF HIERARCHY AMONG THE GUARRONS, FOR THEY MEASURED AND JUDGED THEM ACCORDING TO THEIR OWN UNDERSTANDING, AND FAILED TO SEE THROUGH THE EYES OF THE ENEMY. THEY WOULD HAVE DOUBTED EVEN IF A GUARRON HIMSELF HAD TOLD THEM THAT THE SINGLE

MOST VALUABLE QUALITY FOR THEM WAS NOT VALOR OR STRENGTH, OR EVEN WISDOM, BUT A SENSE OF UTTER INDIFFERENCE AND CALLOUSNESS BEFORE THE ENEMY'S COPIOUSLY SPILLED BLOOD. ONLY INDIVIDUALS CAPABLE OF FEELING NO MERCY WERE ELEVATED TO THE THRONE OF UGROK SON. EVEN THE SLIGHTEST SIGN OF SOFTNESS ON THE PART OF THE LEADER WAS BOUND TO LEAD TO A COUP THAT COST THE OFFENDER HIS LIFE AND POWER.

HOWEVER, THESE CREATURES WERE NOT PRIMITIVE, AND THEY TOO HAD CUSTOMS SIMILAR TO THOSE OF HUMANS, EXCEPT THAT THE PRINCIPLE OF EQUALITY WAS CONSIDERABLY MORE PRONOUNCED - NO ONE STRONGER WOULD BIND HIMSELF TO SOMEONE WEAKER AND CARRY HIM ON HIS BACK. IT WAS FOR THIS REASON THAT THE WOUNDED IN BATTLE WERE KILLED BY THEIR BATTLE COMPANIONS, WHOSE LIVES THEY HAD NOT INFREQUENTLY SAVED EARLIER.

THE FOREMAN WAS GREETED SOLEMNLY WITH SHOUTS:

- UGHORNA LEGOL!

THE GUARRONS WERE AS IF INTOXICATED BY THE EXTRAORDINARY VICTORY ACHIEVED. THE DEMOLISHED BASE WOULD REPRESENT A VALUABLE SOURCE OF KEVLARITE, FROM WHICH THEIR SAGES CAST ARMOR AND WEAPONS, LIKE THE MEDIEVAL MASTERS OF THE HUMAN RACE, WHOSE EXISTENCE THEY HAD NOT EVEN SUSPECTED IN THE PAST.

THE HIGH CHIEFTAIN DISMOUNTED FROM HIS HEAVILY ARMoured, NATURALLY SPIKED GROANDUS, CROSSING HIS ARMS IN FRONT OF HIS POWERFUL CHEST.

- 'ONGURO ZENAL,' HE GROWLED. (TRANSLATED: 'VICTORY IS OURS, IT BELONGS TO ALL.')

A MIGHTY WAVE OF APPROVING ROARS FOLLOWED THAT STATEMENT. TO THE UNACCUSTOMED HUMAN EAR, THEY COULD HAVE BEEN LIKENED TO SOME INFERNAL CACOPHONY OF UNINTELLIGIBLE SOUNDS, BUT IN FACT THEY WERE FULL OF AMUSEMENT, PRIDE, AND ELATION.

- 'KEZANO ARDOM,' ZARAG TU BEGAN AGAIN AFTER ALL THAT CHORUS HAD DIED DOWN, 'DISANA AR DU TOH. (TRANSLATED: 'THE LOOT BELONGS TO THE MOST RUTHLESS.')

- 'NIBONO RI IMBERO ZACHI,' HE CONTINUED, THOUGH SUBTLE SIGNS OF IMPATIENCE WERE BEGINNING TO SHOW IN THE CROWD. (TRANSLATED: 'A TRAITOR BROUGHT IT TO US.')

EVEN THE SIMPLE RANK-AND-FILE SOLDIERS SENSED THAT TODAY'S VICTORY WAS PIVOTAL AND WON WITH A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF BLOOD, GUARANI AND FOREIGN. THAT IS WHY THEY WERE SILENT AND LISTENED TO THE LAST WORDS OF THEIR GREAT LEADER.

- 'EMSHO ZHI LI OMO DAZO' (TRANSLATED: 'WE HATE TRAITORS, BUT THERE ARE NO RULES IN WAR.')

HE WAVED HIS HUGE GREEN PAW TO INDICATE THAT ANY FURTHER TALK WAS UNNECESSARY.

THE BRUTAL CREATURES DIDN'T WAIT LONG TO BE PLEADED WITH, BUT POUNCED MERCILESSLY ON WHAT WAS LEFT. EACH WAS FREE TO TAKE WHAT THEY DEEMED WORTHY FOR THEMSELVES. THE SIMPLER SOLDIERS EVEN DRAGGED AWAY THE BODIES OF THE SLAIN HUMAN SOLDIERS TO FEED TO THEIR OWN GROUNDS. THE GUARRONS THEMSELVES, WHO HAD DEVELOPED A STRONG PERSONAL BOND WITH THE ANIMALS ENTRUSTED TO THEM, FELT ANXIETY WHEN THEY HAD TO FEED THEM. AND THEY CERTAINLY HAD REASON TO - CASUALTIES WERE NOT RARE, AS THE MONSTROUS CREATURES WERE HIGHLY UNPREDICTABLE, EVEN TO THEIR OWN RIDERS. HOWEVER, THE SYMBIOSIS BUILT BETWEEN THEM WAS SO ANCIENT THAT NO ONE AMONG THE MOST PROMINENT GUARRON CHRONICLERS DARED TO STATE WITH PRECISION WHEN THE MONSTROUS CREATURES WERE TAMED BY MEMBERS OF THEIR RACE.

SO GREAT WAS THE CONFUSION AROUND THAT IT RESEMBLED A BUILDING SITE OF THE DISTANT PAST, WHEN HUMAN WORKERS, USING ONLY THEIR BARE HANDS, ERECTED ASTONISHING AND SPECTACULAR BUILDINGS - WORKS OF ART. ONLY NOW IT WAS THE

OPPOSITE - INSTEAD OF CREATION, DESTRUCTION REIGNED ALL AROUND.

PRINCE NUNDRAG - THE SON OF ZARAG TU - OVERSAW ALL THE LOOTING MOST CAREFULLY, AS SOMEONE COULD STILL STEAL SOMETHING UNBECOMING OF HIS RANK, THUS HARMING THE ROYAL FAMILY OF UGROK SIN.

EVERYONE EXPECTED THE PRINCE TO SUCCEED HIS FATHER ON THE THRONE, BUT HE SHOWED NO SIGNS OF WEAKNESS OR INSECURITY DESPITE HIS VENERABLE AGE OF 165 ZEGANDARIAN YEARS. HIS YOUNGEST SON, NUNDRAG, WAS HIS ONLY FAVORITE, AND IT WAS FOR THIS REASON THAT HE WAS CHOSEN TO PARTICIPATE IN HIS FATHER'S CAMPAIGN.

THE PRINCE WAS QUITE DIFFERENT FROM HIS PEERS, GROUNDED ONLY IN THE BELIEFS OF GUARRON FOLKLORE. IT WAS IN THESE THAT CONTAINED THE REASONABLE EXPLANATION FOR THE GUARRON HATRED OF MEMBERS OF THE HUMAN RACE. ACCORDING TO LEGEND, THE TWO RACES HAD COMMON ORIGINS AND ROOTS. THE MOTHER GODDESS MARAK TULBA HAD GIVEN LIFE TO TWO GREAT SONS, GIMLIN ORN (THE PROGENITOR OF THE GUARRONS) AND MIDRIEL (THE PROGENITOR OF THE HUMAN RACE). HOWEVER, THE DIFFERENCE IN THEIR APPEARANCE BECAME APPARENT AS SOON AS THEY WERE BORN. NOWHERE IN THE LEGEND, HOWEVER, WAS IT STATED FOR WHAT REASONS HER YOUNGER SON MIDRIEL HAD BECOME HER FAVORITE. WHEN SHE HAD TO BEQUEATH HER SECRET POWERS TO THEM SHE CHOSE HIM. THIS UNEXPECTED TWIST ANGERED GIMLIN GREATLY AND FORCED HIM TO DECLARE A DUEL ON HIS BROTHER. THE TWO MET ON THE MYTHICAL MOUNTAIN OF ECLEC ZON, WHERE MIDRIEL DEFEATED HIM. DESPERATE AND BROKEN, GIMLIN RETREATED TO THE MISTY MOUNTAINS NORTHEAST OF RODWELL. THERE, HOWEVER, HE PLOTTED HIS TERRIBLE REVENGE AGAINST THE HUMANS. MOST OF THE GUARRON WERE INDEED WAITING FOR THE DAY WHEN HE WOULD APPEAR FROM SOMEWHERE AND LEAD THEM ONWARD TO CONQUEST.

PRINCE NUNDRAG HAD SOME DOUBTS ABOUT THE LEGEND, AS THERE WERE DEFINITELY MAJOR HOLES IN IT. BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM INTERNALLY AGREEING THAT THE GUARRON WERE CREATED SOLELY TO DEFEAT THEIR ENEMIES.

MOREOVER, HE HAD HEARD SOME DISTURBING RUMORS ABOUT THE ORIGINS OF HIS RACE. HE HOPED IN TIME HE WOULD BE CONVINCED OF WHAT WAS RIGHT TO BELIEVE.

^^^

THE DESERT SEEMED TO REALLY HAVE NO END. AND THE WINDS CONTINUED TO BLOW EVER SO RELENTLESSLY. EACH SUCCESSIVE SAND WAVE POLISHED THE ALREADY SMOOTH AS GLASS SURFACE OF THE NEARBY DUNES. BARELY VISIBLE TO THE EYE, GRAINS OF SAND WERE SENT INTO INFINITY, WHERE THEY BECAME COMPLETELY INVISIBLE, ONLY TO HAVE THIS CRUDE DANCE OF NATURE CONTINUE AGAIN AND AGAIN. FINALLY, THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN HEAVEN AND EARTH WAS COMPLETELY LOST AND EVERYTHING BECAME ONE. FOR THE LAST THOUSAND YEARS HUMAN CIVILIZATION HAD DEFINITELY CHANGED ITS COURSE, BUT THE PRIMAL LOGIC OF THE CYCLE OF NATURE HAD REMAINED INTACT. IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE WAS PITCHED A HUGE TENT OF A VERY FANCIFUL SHAPE, RESEMBLING THE ANCIENT BABYLONIAN ZIGGURATS ERECTED IN PRAISE OF THE GODS. SURROUNDING IT WERE A STRONG GUARD OF GUARRONS AND A FEW GROANDUS, WHO, UNUSUAL AS IT WAS FOR THEIR KIND, SEEMED TO FEEL SOMETHING AKIN TO AWE, AND WERE LESS GAP-TOOTHED THAN USUAL.

SUDDENLY THERE WAS A COMMOTION IN THE MAKESHIFT ENCAMPMENT AS THE GUARDS CAUGHT SIGHT OF RIDERS IN THE DISTANCE. IN A FLASH, LOUD CRIES RANG OUT ALL AROUND, AND EVEN A FEW OF THE HUGE MONSTERS GROWLED DEFIANTLY, STARTLED BY THE SUDDEN NOISE.

- THE PRINCE IS COMING BACK! PRINCE NUNDRAG IS ALIVE!

IT WAS HARD TO DESCRIBE THE 'SEMBLANCE' OF JOY THAT WAS WRITTEN ON THE RUGGED FACES OF THOSE STERN WARRIORS AS THEY UTTERED THOSE WORDS. AS ALREADY MENTIONED, THE GUARRONS UNDERSTOOD CONSIDERABLY OF WARFARE, FOR IT WAS IN THEIR BLOOD TO FIGHT. THEY WOULD WASTE NO TIME IN IDLE TALK, FOR THEY SPOKE THE LANGUAGE OF NATURE; MOREOVER, THEY WERE ITS ELEMENT. THE VICTOR WITH THEM WAS GREETED AS A DEITY, BUT AT THE SPECIAL CEREMONY HIS MORTAL ORIGIN WAS NECESSARILY EMPHASIZED. THE SIMPLE WARRIORS EVEN BELIEVED THAT TOUCHING THE PURPLE CLOAK OF THE RULER OF UGROK SIN WOULD BRING THEM, IF NOT HAPPINESS, AT LEAST SOME PROTECTION AGAINST BAD LUCK.

THE DUST CLOUD OF THE APPROACHING CARAVAN WAS GROWING LARGER AND CLEARER IN OUTLINE, AND IF HITHERTO THE GUARRONS HAD STILL HAD SOME MISGIVINGS ABOUT A POSSIBLE HUMAN ATTACK, BOLDLY AND CLEVERLY DISGUISED AS IT WAS, THEY WERE COMPLETELY DISPELLED. THEIR HUGE PAWS LOOSENED THEIR GRIP AROUND THEIR WEAPONS, ALWAYS HELD AT THE READY, BUT THE GUARDS REMAINED EVER SO VIGILANT.

- 'I WOULD NEVER MISTAKE THE ROAR OF THE GUARRONS OF NAS RADAL,' ONE OF THE GUARDS STANDING NEARBY GROWLED SOFTLY, 'MARK MY WORD, THIS IS A GOOD OMEN.'

- 'THE MOTHER GODDESS PROTECTS US,' ADDED ANOTHER STANDING NEARBY.

HOWEVER, IT WAS UNLIKELY THAT ANY OF THE OTHERS HEARD HIM, AND EVEN IF THEY DID, THEY PAID HIM NO MIND. AS BANAL AS IT SOUNDED, IN THOSE FEW MOMENTS TIME SEEMED TO HAVE STOPPED ITS COURSE, SO ANTICIPATED WAS THE JOYOUS EVENT THAT COULD UPEND THE ENTIRE HISTORY OF THEIR KIND. FOR A FEW SPLIT SECONDS, EVEN THE DESERT WAS IN ABSOLUTE SYNC WITH THEIR DESIRES TO SURVIVE AND REGAIN THEIR FORMER MIGHT, AND IT WAS AS IF THE RELENTLESS SANDWIND OF ZEGANDARIA HAD SUBSIDED. NATURE'S SILENCE, HOWEVER, WAS A LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

PRINCE NUNDRAG NEARLY LEAPT FROM HIS GROANDUS BEFORE THE ANIMAL HAD FULLY STOPPED ITS PROGRESS, ELICITING CHEERS OF APPROVAL FROM HIS SUBJECTS. HE WAS FOLLOWED BY SEVERAL OF HIS PERSONAL BODYGUARDS, AS WELL AS A FEW LOOKOUTS WHO WALKED ALONGSIDE THE CARAVAN. FARTHER ON, AS FAR AS THE EYE COULD SEE, A LONG LINE OF GUARRON WARRIORS WAS DESCENDING LIKE A CENTIPEDE. ONE COULD EASILY SENSE HOW MUCH THEY DESIRED TO SEE HIM ON THE THRONE AS SUPREME LEADER. HE HONoured THOSE PRESENT WITH A REGAL NOD AND GROWLED APPROVINGLY AT THEIR CONGRATULATIONS. EVEN BEFORE THEY CAME TO THEIR SENSES, HE FLEW INTO THE HUGE TENT THAT WAS NOT MEANT FOR MERE MORTALS, BUT ONLY FOR THE RULERS OF THE LAST DYNASTY.

THE INSIDE OF THE TENT WAS WORTHY OF DESCRIPTION, AS IT WAS COVERED WITH ELURIAN SKINS OF SLAIN NOBLE ANIMALS THAT WERE ONLY FOUND IN THE MISTY MOUNTAINS, OR THAT WERE ALMOST NO LONGER EVEN FOUND THERE. IN THE MIDDLE OF THE HUGE TENT STOOD ZARAG TU, THE SUPREME LORD OF THE GUARRONS, REGALLY.

- 'NUNDRAG, DID YOU TAKE WHAT WAS LEFT? YOU UNDERSTAND YOURSELF THAT WE HAD TO GO BACK TO STRENGTHEN OUR POSITION AND SECURE OUR REAR,' THE VOICE BOOMED MIGHTILY AND IMPLACABLY.

- 'OF COURSE, YOUR MAJESTY,' PRINCE NUNDRAG WAS STRICTLY OFFICIAL, BECAUSE THE PROTOCOL OF THE HIERARCHY REQUIRED IT. IN PRACTICE, THE RULER STOOD HIGHER THAN THE PRINCE. 'EVERYTHING WAS EXECUTED EXACTLY AS YOU ORDERED.'

ZARAG TU NODDED, SLIGHTLY BORED, BUT CONTINUED IN THE SAME IMPLACABLE TONE.

- WHAT DO YOU THINK OF THE FIGHTING SPIRIT OF THE PEOPLE? THEY SHOWED MORE RESISTANCE THAN WE EXPECTED. THEY EVEN DARED TO SHOW UNHEARD OF AUDACITY AND TRIED TO HUMILIATE OUR WARRIORS.



NUNDRAG WAS PRUDENT ENOUGH TO PAUSE A MOMENT AND WAIT A MOMENT LONGER TO SEE IF HIS FATHER WAS GOING TO ADD ANYTHING ELSE, THEN ANSWERED SLOWLY AND COMPLETELY CALMLY.

- I THINK THIS BIOHUMAN SPECIES HOLDS A LOT OF SURPRISES, BUT IT'S PRETTY HELPLESS WITHOUT ITS MODERN TOYS, WHEREAS A GUARRON CAN OVERPOWER A HUMAN EVEN WITH ITS BARE HANDS, IN ANY WEATHER.

THE KING NODDED AFFIRMATIVELY.

- HAVE YOU DISTRIBUTED THE SPOILS AMONG THE WARRIORS, NUNDRAG?

- 'YES, YOUR MAJESTY,' REPLIED THE SON.

- THE COMMON WARRIORS BROUGHT US VICTORY, NUNDRAG, NOT THAT TRAITOR. HE JUST HELPED THEM A LITTLE. THAT IS ALL. NEVER FORGET THAT YOUR POWER RESTS ON THEM AND THEIR LOYALTY. AND NOW LEAVE ME.

THE PRINCE BOWED RESPECTFULLY AND LEFT THE TENT. OF COURSE HE HAD DONE EVERYTHING HE HAD BEEN ORDERED, AND MORE. BUT IT DID NOT ESCAPE HIS GAZE THAT, DESPITE HIS FATHER'S STERN FACE, A CERTAIN DESPONDENCY PLAGUED HIM. HE EVEN TRIED TO BANISH THAT THOUGHT, AWARE OF ITS FUTILITY.

- 'WELL NOW WAS THE TIME TO SAVOR THE VICTORY, AND FLAUNT IT LIKE A TROPHY.,' NUNDRAG HEARD A MOCKING VOICE BEHIND HIM. 'THERE WAS NO NEED TO EVEN TRY TO GUESS WHO THE OWNER WAS. HIS OLDER BROTHER, KIER ZOH, STOOD A FEW STEPS AWAY FROM HIM, BUT YOU'RE DADDY'S FAVORITE AFTER ALL. WHATEVER THEY'RE SAYING, MAYBE IT REALLY IS TRUE THAT HE'S CLAIMING YOU AS HIS HEIR.'

NUNDRAG PRETENDED HE DIDN'T EVEN HEAR HIM. HE DIDN'T WANT TO GET INTO CONFLICTS JUST TODAY. HE DIDN'T WANT TO CLOUD HIS VICTORY. BUT HE WAS CLEARLY AWARE THAT THOUGH CLOSE TO THE

TENT, THE USUAL GUARDS WERE NOT AROUND THEM FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON. AND SUDDENLY HE STOOD AT ATTENTION.

- 'DO YOU THINK YOU CAN COMMAND OUR GLORIOUS ARMIES, APPEAR A WORTHY SUBSTITUTE FOR OUR GREAT FATHER?,' ASKED KIER ZOH, BARING HIS TEETH LIKE A RABID DOG.

NUNDRAG INSTINCTIVELY GRIPPED THE HILT OF HIS HAJJAR, READY FOR ANY UNPREDICTABLE ACTION FROM HIS BROTHER. HE KNEW THE TWO WOULD EVENTUALLY FIGHT TO THE DEATH, FOR SUCH WERE THE RULES OF SUCCESSION TO THE THRONE, BEQUEATHED ACCORDING TO LEGEND BY GIMLIN ORN HIMSELF.

- 'RELAX, DON'T TAKE YOURSELF SERIOUSLY. THIS IS NOT THE TIME OR PLACE FOR IT THOUGH. THAT WOULD BE TO SULLY THE BLOOD OF THE ROYAL FAMILY. SOMETHING, PRACTICALLY, UNACCEPTABLE.,' GROWLED HIS BROTHER, SLIGHTLY SCORNFULLY.

- 'I'M NOT AFRAID TO CONFRONT YOU,' NUNDRAG REPLIED CALMLY. 'YOU KNOW THAT VERY WELL.'

- 'YOU MAY HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO VERY SOON,' KIER ZOH GROUND OUT THROUGH HIS TEETH, MOVING AWAY WITH QUICK STEPS.

THE PRINCE TURNED, BUT HIS BROTHER SEEMED TO HAVE SUNK INTO THE GROUND. A HUNDRED YARDS OR SO PAST THE TENT A FEW GROANDUS WERE LAZILY MUNCHING AWAY, APPARENTLY NOT SO COMFORTABLE UNDER THE RAYS OF THE SCORCHING SUN DESPITE THEIR THICK SKINS.

NUNDRAG THOUGHT FOR A MOMENT. HE REMEMBERED THAT HIS FATHER HAD LOOKED DEJECTED, AND ONLY NOW DID HE REALIZE THE REASON FOR IT. THE APPARENT CHALLENGE HAD STARTED THE SO-CALLED GUARRON RITUAL, THE DANCE OF DEATH. THE TRADITION WAS STRONGER THAN EVEN THE HIGH LORD OF THE GUARRONS AND HE COULD DO NOTHING. MOREOVER, WHILE THE GAMES LASTED, HOSTILITIES WITH THE ENEMY USUALLY CEASED, AND THIS COULD MAKE THEM VULNERABLE TO POSSIBLE ATTACKS BY THE HUMAN

RACE. THIS RITUAL GAVE THE MORE NEGLECTED OF THE SONS THE RIGHT TO GAIN THE UPPER HAND OVER THEIR FAVORED BROTHERS BY DECLARING A DUEL. USUALLY IT WAS NOT HELD IMMEDIATELY, FOR THE ONE WHO ANNOUNCED THE CHALLENGE, SYMBOLICALLY SPEAKING, TOOK THE ROLE OF 'HUNTER' AND THE CHALLENGED ONE TOOK THE ROLE OF 'VICTIM,' NO MATTER WHAT PLACE HE OCCUPIED IN THE LINE OF SUCCESSION. HIS STATUS WAS RETAINED UNTIL THE MOMENT HE PIERCED THE THROAT OF HIS BLOOD RIVAL. THE WHOLE CAT-AND-MOUSE GAME COULD HAVE LASTED EVEN A WHOLE MONTH. OF COURSE, SUCH CASES WERE NOT AT ALL SOME KIND OF EXCEPTION OR PRECEDENT, AS NUNDRAG STILL HAD SOME RECOLLECTION THAT THEIR GLORIOUS FATHER HAD COME TO POWER IN THE SAME MANNER. IN PRACTICE, IT WAS RARE FOR THE PREVIOUS RULER TO PASS AWAY FROM NATURAL DEATH. THE GUARRONS WHO HAD TAKEN OVER AS CO-VIEWERS ENSURED THAT OTHERS WOULD NOT INTERFERE IN THE DUEL. THEY WERE USUALLY AMONG THE REST AND DID NOT BEAT ABOUT THE BUSH, BUT THEY WERE UNRESERVEDLY DEVOTED TO THEIR SOVEREIGN AND CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD THE IMPORTANCE OF THEIR TASK, WHICH IN PRACTICE MEANT THE HIGHEST POSSIBLE HONOR FOR MERE MORTALS.

- 'WELL, IF YOU REALLY WANT WAR, MY DEAR BROTHER, YOU SHALL HAVE IT,' HE MURMURED THOUGHTFULLY. 'EVEN THOUGH YOU PUT OUR ENTIRE RACE IN MORTAL DANGER WITH YOUR MINDLESS JEALOUSY AND GREED.'

THE CEREMONY OF WELCOMING THE VICTOR BEGAN ONLY WHEN DARKNESS HAD ALMOST COMPLETELY FALLEN OVER SYNTHROS. THE GUARRON CAMP WAS ABOUT TWO HUNDRED ZEGANDARIAN MILES FROM DIOMEDES BASE IN A NORTH-NORTHEASTERLY DIRECTION. LIKE WISE WARRIORS, THEY HAD LEFT THE MOUNTAINS BEHIND, WHICH ON THE ONE HAND PROVIDED THEM WITH SAFE COVER, AND ON THE OTHER PROVIDED A BACKUP ROUTE FOR WITHDRAWAL BACK NORTH TO XANDERAR, OR EVEN TO THE MISTY MOUNTAINS NORTHEAST OF RODWELL. AND THE ENDLESS WILDERNESS BEFORE THEM WOULD PRECLUDE ANY ATTEMPT AT AN UNRECRUITED ASSAULT. NOT THAT SUCH WAS VERY LIKELY, GIVEN

THE DEVASTATION THROUGHOUT THE SURROUNDING AREA AND THE SIGNIFICANT AMOUNT OF HUMAN WARRIORS SLAUGHTERED.

- 'TIME. THE PRINCE SHOULD GET READY.' SHOUTED THE SPECIALLY TRAINED 'HERALDS'. 'THE CEREMONY OF BLOOD BAPTISM SHOULD BEGIN.'

EVERY VICTORY WON GAVE THE VICTOR THE EXCLUSIVE RIGHT OF INVIOABILITY REGARDING HIS STATUS AS LEADER. THE ONLY THING THAT COULD VIOLATE SUCH IMMUNITY WAS THE 'DANCE OF DEATH,' WHICH HAD TO BE PLAYED WITH OR WITHOUT THE CONSENT OF THE PARTICIPANTS. THAT WAS WHY KIER ZOH WAS IN NO HURRY TO ATTACK HIS BROTHER, BECAUSE THAT COULD HAVE CONFLICTED WITH THE SECOND MOST IMPORTANT TRADITION AND THAT COULD HAVE BROUGHT DISUNITY AMONG ALL THE GUARRONS. AND EVEN HE COULDN'T ALLOW THAT, NOT AFTER ALL THESE YEARS, WHEN THE BRAVE WARRIORS HAD FINALLY COME DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN TO AVENGE THEIR HUMILIATION AND RECLAIM THEIR RIGHT TO RULE THIS PLANET LONG BEFORE HUMANS SET FOOT HERE. GREAT CARE AND CAUTION HAD TO BE EXERCISED, AND THE PRINCE WAS WELL AWARE THAT HE WOULD IN NO WAY MISS THE OPPORTUNITY PRESENTED BY FATE OR TRADITION (AND HE WAS NOT SURE WHICH!). THE GUARRONS MIGHT HAVE MANY PRINCES, BUT ONLY ONE KING!

THE BATTLE DRUMS OF THE GUARRONS OF NAS RADAL (AS THE ROYAL FAMILY'S PERSONAL ELITE GUARD WAS CALLED) BOOMED RHYTHMICALLY AND SOLEMNLY. EACH OF THEM LITERALLY BRISTLED WHEN THEY HEARD THAT SOUND. HUNDREDS OF YEARS OF HISTORY AND TRADITION ECHOED IN EACH HARSH HUM. THESE SOUNDS WERE SACRED TO EVERY TRUE WARRIOR, AND HE WAS WILLING TO GIVE HIS BLOOD FOR THEM. BUT THIS TIME THE MEANING OF THEIR SOUND WAS DIFFERENT. THEY WERE FILLED WITH PRIDE AND A SENSE OF RESTORED DIGNITY. THEY WERE FULL OF SPARKS OF NEW HOPE. THEY WERE GLIMMERS OF A NEW DAWN. THEIR NEW DAWN. THEIR NEW BEGINNING.

THE PRINCE STEPPED SOLEMNLY OUT OF THE SECOND CEREMONIAL TENT HIS SUBORDINATES HAD PITCHED ESPECIALLY FOR HIM. ALL AROUND, THOSE PRESENT HAD LOWERED THEIR HEADS.

HE WAS DRESSED IN A SPECIAL CEREMONIAL ROBE OF QUIZON THAT THE SOLDIERS HAD TAKEN FROM THE BURNED AND LOOTED BASE OF THE PEOPLE. HE WALKED SLOWLY AND WITH DIGNITY BETWEEN THE TWO LINES OF BOWING SOLDIERS, SUBJECTS AND ONLOOKERS FROM THE STABLE. EVERYONE WANTED TO SEE HIM UP CLOSE, ESPECIALLY SINCE RUMORS OF THE ALTERCATION WITH HIS BROTHER HAD SPREAD THANKS TO THE SCOUTS. EVERYONE WAS NOW AWARE THAT A CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT WAS IMMINENT, AND THIS WAS POSSIBLY THE MOST INTERESTING AND IMPORTANT TOPIC AT THE MOMENT.

NUNDRAG SAT ON A MAGNIFICENT THRONE, A SPECIALLY PREPARED BUCKET OF THE BLOOD OF SOLDIERS KILLED EARLIER SPILLING AT HIS FEET. THE CROWD AROUND WENT ABSOLUTELY WILD. THEY KNEW THAT NO ONE HAD THE RIGHT TO DECLARE A DUEL ON ANYONE ON A DAY LIKE TODAY, AND NOT EVEN THE BRAVEST GUARRON WOULD STEP UP TO THAT TRADITION.

THE YOUNG HEIR STOOD UP AND EVERYONE FELL SILENT.

MY BRAVE WARRIORS, THERE IS NO TIME FOR IDLE TALK, ESPECIALLY WHEN VICTORY IS SO NEAR. YESTERDAY MY BROTHER KIER ZOH ANNOUNCED A DUEL, SO EXPECT THE HUNT TO BEGIN SHORTLY. I KNOW WELL THE TRADITIONS OF OUR GLORIOUS ANCESTORS AND FOR THE SAKE OF THE SURVIVAL OF OUR SPECIES, I WILL LOOK TO WIN IT AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE AND PROVE THAT I DESERVE TO BE YOUR RULER IN THE FUTURE.

IN THE FARTHEST CORNER OF THE CAMP, A FELLOW WATCHER OBSERVED THE CEREMONY UNNOTICED AND EVEN BEFORE IT WAS OVER QUIETLY SLIPPED AWAY WITHOUT ANYONE SEEING HIM. HE HAD AN IMPORTANT MISSION, ASSIGNED TO HIM BY THE PRINCE HIMSELF, TO ASSIST HIM DURING THE HUNT, IN EXCHANGE FOR THE POSITION OF HIS CHIEF DEPUTY. KIER ZOH HAD PREDICTABLY WITHDRAWN AND SUNK INTO THE GROUND. MOREOVER, TRADITION DICTATED THAT

AFTER THE CHALLENGE WAS ANNOUNCED, HE WOULD BE LYNCHED BY THE SUBJECTS FOR ATTEMPTING TO USURP POWER. SO HIS LIFE WAS IN DANGER ON THAT SINGLE DAY OF HIS BROTHER'S CORONATION AS KING. FROM THE NEXT DAY, HOWEVER, HE REGAINED HIS STATUS AS PRINCE, AND THE LIFE-AND-DEATH CHASE WAS ON.

PERHAPS SUCH AN EXPLANATION OF THE CHANGE OF POWER WOULD SOUND A LITTLE CONFUSING TO THE PEOPLE, BUT THE TRUTH WAS THAT HIS PRINCIPLES HAD NEVER BETRAYED THE UNITY OF THIS RACE THAT HAD STRUGGLED TO SURVIVE FOR THE LAST FEW THOUSAND YEARS. THE WATCHER QUIETLY WALKED PAST THE TENT OF THE WOMEN OF NAS RADAL WHICH WAS AT THE EDGE OF THE CAMP AND SANK INTO THE DESERT, BUT HIS INTENTIONS DID NOT ESCAPE THE WATCHFUL EYE OF RAS TIAN, THE DAUGHTER OF ZARAG TU'S FORMER CHIEF OF THE WATCH. SHE WAS A BEAUTIFUL MAIDEN, TALL AND SLENDER, AND COVERED THE GUARRON NOTIONS OF BEAUTY. SHE COULD RIDE FOR HOURS, SHOOT A BOW WITH NO LESS ACCURACY THAN ANY MAN IN THE CAMP, BUT SHE POSSESSED SOMETHING THAT VERY FEW MEN COULD BOAST - A SUBTLE INTUITION OF THE SITUATION AND ITS POSSIBLE FUTURE DEVELOPMENT.

THROUGH THE SCARCELY OPEN PROCESS OF THE TENT, OUT OF THE CORNER OF HER EYE, SHE CAUGHT SIGHT OF THE LOOKOUT MOVING AWAY, WHICH AT ONCE GAVE HER GRAVE MISGIVINGS AS TO HIS INTENTIONS. IT WAS COMMON KNOWLEDGE THAT, DESPITE THEIR SPECIAL STATUS AS PUBLIC SERVANTS, LOOKOUTS WERE NOT ALLOWED TO LEAVE CAMP ON THIS CORONATION DAY, AND THIS THIRD MAJOR TRADITION OF THE SPECIES WAS VIRTUALLY UNBREAKABLE.

'WHO IS HE?,' SHE THOUGHT, 'I MUST TELL PAPA AT ONCE. HE'LL KNOW BETTER THAN I WHAT TO DO.'

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN: KEITH

KEITH AND MAJOR KETROL STRODE THROUGH THE DARK ROCK AND SAND REGIONS OF THE NORTHERN BORDER OF SYNTHROS. THIS TROUBLED AREA WAS ONE OF THE KEYS TO THE WAR IN GENERAL. IT HAD WON ITS AUTONOMY BEFORE THE LAST GREAT WAR FOR AU KAKTIR BEGAN. AND IT WAS OF ENORMOUS ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPORTANCE. THEY WERE TRYING TO USE THE LAST MINUTES BEFORE DAWN TO FIND A SAFER HIDING PLACE. THEY KNEW ALL TOO WELL THAT THE GUARRON HAD TAKEN OVER THE ENTIRE SOUTHERN FRONT, AND IT WAS UTTER MADNESS TO TRY TO RETURN TO ENSARIAN. THEY HAD BOTH BEEN THROUGH A NUMBER OF ADVENTURES SINCE THEY HAD PARTED WITH SASIA. ONE OF THEM HAD EVEN INCLUDED AN ATTEMPT TO TAME A HUGE GROANDUS TO SERVE AS THEIR TRANSPORT. SOMETHING THAT, QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY, DIDN'T WORK OUT. THE ANIMAL NEARLY CRUSHED THEM TO DEATH AND THEY WERE SIMPLY FORCED TO SHOOT IT AT POINT BLANK RANGE.

'I CAN'T IMAGINE HOW NATURE COULD EVER CREATE SUCH A CREATURE. I'D SAY WE JUST PUT IT OUT OF ITS MISERY, KEITH,' THE MAJOR HAD SAID IN HIS TYPICAL STYLE AS HE PULLED THE TRIGGER ON HIS ZIRAULT.

THEIR WANDERING HAD NOW BEEN GOING ON FOR NEARLY A MONTH. TO SOMEONE BIASED, IT WOULD BE A LITTLE STRANGE WHY THEY HADN'T MOVED AWAY FROM ENSARIAN, OR AT LEAST TRIED TO CAPTURE A SPEEDER THEY COULD USE TO GET TO A SAFER PLACE, BUT THE TRUTH WAS THEY HAD NO SUCH OPTION. KEITH WAS COUNTING ON FINDING IN THE ENEMY'S UNDERBELLY, AT LEAST A PLASMA RIFLE OR SOME MORE SERIOUS WEAPON, BECAUSE FOR NOW THEY WERE ONLY RELYING ON THE MAJOR'S BLASTER. WATER WAS A PARTICULAR PROBLEM. AS DISGUSTING AS IT SOUNDED, KEITH HAD MANAGED TO SWIPE A SMALL FILTRATION PROBE, WHICH HE WAS ABLE TO USE TO PUMP OUT SOME OF THE KILLED ANIMAL'S BODILY SECRETIONS AND TURN THEM INTO WATER. WELL, OF

COURSE, THE WATER DIDN'T TASTE THE BEST POSSIBLE UNDER THE CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT AT LEAST IT GUARANTEED THEIR SURVIVAL.

ONE MIGHT THINK THAT MAJOR KETROL WAS JUST A FRIVOLOUS LOUT, INCAPABLE OF ANYTHING BUT EXCELLENT WEAPON HANDLING AND SHAKE DRINKING, BUT TO THINK OF IT THAT WAY WOULD BE TOO ELEMENTARY. BEHIND HIS DISGUSTINGLY FLIPPANT CHARACTER, THE MAJOR ESPOUSED A SIMPLE AND STRAIGHTFORWARD PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE. OTHERWISE HE WOULD NOT HAVE SURVIVED THE MANY BATTLES HE HAD BEEN INVOLVED IN.

IT DEFINITELY GAVE HIM THE IMPRESSION THAT KEITH WAS MORE TACITURN THAN USUAL, AS IF SOMETHING OCCUPIED HIS MIND ALL THE TIME. THE MAJOR HAD ENCOUNTERED ALL SORTS OF ODDBALLS IN HIS LIFE IN THE ARMY, AND WAS 'USED TO EVERYTHING' TO SAY THE LEAST. BUT THIS TIME SOME STRANGE FEELING GRIPPED HIM FROM WITHIN. SOMETHING SEEMED TO BE WHISPERING TO HIM TO BE MORE ALERT THAN EVER AND NOT TO LET HIS GUARD DOWN, DESPITE THE DECEPTIVE FEELING SUGGESTED BY THE SURROUNDING DEAD DESOLATION, REMINISCENT OF A CALM BEFORE A STORM. FOR THE FIRST TIME SINCE MEETING KEITH, HE WONDERED HOW WELL HE ACTUALLY KNEW HIM. IT WAS TRUE THAT HE HAD RESCUED HIM FROM THAT 'CURSED GUARRON WORM,' AS HE PUT IT, BUT GENERALLY SPEAKING, APART FROM THAT FACT, THEIR ACQUAINTANCE DATED BACK SEVERAL HOURS BEFORE SASIA HAD FIRST MET THEM ON THEIR WAY OUT OF UNCLE ZENGAR'S TAVERN.

THE RISING SUN, WAS BEGINNING TO DYE WITH CRIMSON LIGHT THE DESERT EXPANSE THAT LAY BEFORE THEM. THE VIEW WAS INDESCRIBABLY BEAUTIFUL. THEY WERE STRUCK BY ITS PRIMAL LOGIC. IT WAS AS IF THIS ALMOST DEAD PLANET WAS BEING REBORN AND LIVING A NEW LIFE, MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN THE LAST.

- 'KEITH, DON'T YOU THINK WE'RE GOING IN CIRCLES?,' SAID THE MAJOR, CLEARLY LOSING PATIENCE.



- 'MOVEMENT IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH, MAJOR,' KEITH TRIED TO THROW IN A NOT VERY APPROPRIATE JOKE, BUT HE HIMSELF KNEW THAT JERRY WAS RIGHT.

THE MAJOR DIDN'T ANSWER, JUST MADE A SOUR GRIMACE, MAKING THE WORDS SUPERFLUOUS.

- 'WHAT DO YOU THINK, ENDWALKER, DID THAT GIRL MANAGE TO GET AWAY?,' HE MAJOR SUDDENLY SNAPPED AT HIM.

- 'WHO KNOWS?,' TOSSED IN KEITH, AS IF CASUALLY, BUT INWARDLY THE ANSWER TO THAT QUESTION WAS NOT AT ALL INDIFFERENT TO HIM.

THERE WAS SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT HER THAT KEPT HIM FROM FORGETTING HER. IN HIS MIND SHE STOOD OUT LIKE A COLOURED IMAGE AMIDST THE GENERAL GREY BACKGROUND. YES, IF ONLY SHE COULD HAVE SAVED HERSELF! BUT IT WAS SO UNLIKELY. PRACTICALLY THE WHOLE BASE HAD BEEN RAZED TO THE GROUND. RATIONAL THINKING SIMPLY TOLD HIM THE WORST. BUT HE FELT IN HIS HEART THAT THERE WAS STILL SOME CHANCE THAT HIS FEARS WERE GROUNDLESS.

^^^

- 'YOU KNOW, KEITH, SOMETIMES BEFORE I FALL ASLEEP I THINK ABOUT HOW MY HEART WON'T BEAT ANYMORE IN THE MORNING. YOU PROBABLY THINK I'M SOME KIND OF SENTIMENTAL FOOL, DON'T YOU? BUT THERE COMES A TIME IN A MAN'S LIFE WHEN HE TAKES STOCK OF ALL HIS GOOD AND BAD DEEDS,' PRONOUNCED THE MAJOR, CLIMBING ANOTHER DUNE. THIS TIME THERE WAS SOMETHING ALTOGETHER PECULIAR IN HIS TONE.

- 'ONE WOULD NOT EXPECT SUCH THOUGHTS FROM YOU, MAJOR,' SAID KEITH, WITH A LITTLE GASP. 'YOU ARE A MAN WITH THE HEART OF A LION,' HE ADDED RESPECTFULLY.

KEITH LOOKED OVER HIS SHOULDER FOR A SECOND, NOT SLOWING HIS PACE IN THE SLIGHTEST. THE OLD MAN WAS PACING BARELY TWO OR THREE YARDS BEHIND HIM.

- THIS WAR WAS NOT STARTED BY US, AND IT WILL NOT END WITH US. DAMN IT! DON'T LET THE CURRENT MOMENT SURPRISE AND FOOL YOU, NO MATTER WHAT EXACTLY IS GOING ON.

- 'MAJOR?,' MUMBLED KEITH, SLIGHTLY CONFUSED. INWARDLY HE THOUGHT, 'WHY ARE YOU TALKING SO INCOHERENTLY?'

- I'M PERFECTLY FINE MY BOY, YOU'LL UNDERSTAND WHAT I MEANT IN TIME. IF WE'RE STILL ALIVE...

KEITH FELL SILENT. HE DARED NOT ASK. WASN'T IT OBVIOUS EXACTLY WHAT HIS WORDS WERE? OR WAS HE JUST TRYING TO POUR OUT THE PAIN IN HIS SOUL. THE TWO WERE STILL COMPLETE STRANGERS. AND THEY'D PROBABLY REMAIN SO. KEITH WAS UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT THEY MIGHT NOT RETURN AT ALL.

- 'THIS WILDERNESS WILL END SOMETIME,' THE MAJOR SAID AS IF WITH THE LAST OF HIS STRENGTH, AND LAUGHED. 'IT CAN'T LAST FOREVER.'

PRESENTLY, CRAWLING ON THE DUNE LIKE LITTLE CATERPILLARS IN THE MIDST OF THE ENDLESS WASTE, THEY HEARD IN THE DISTANCE LOUD SHOUTS AND DRUMS. INSTANTLY THEY LAY DOWN IN THE SAND, BURROWING JUST AS THEY HAD BEEN TRAINED IN THE SPECIALIZED OFFICER PROGRAM, AND CROUCHED IN ANTICIPATION. KEITH PULLED OUT HIS INFRARED BINOCULARS TO GET A BETTER LOOK AT THE ENEMY. THIS KIND OF ENHANCED BINOCULARS GAVE BOTH AN INFRARED PICTURE COMBINED WITH BIOMETRICS, SUCH AS DNA AND VOICE RECOGNITION. THE BINOCULARS' ULTRA-MODERN PROCESSOR CHIP IMMEDIATELY MADE A COMPARISON BETWEEN THE AVAILABLE BIOMETRIC DATABASE AND THE ONE REGISTERED BY THE SENSORS, AND THE INFRARED SURVEILLANCE HAD ANOTHER FUNCTION. BECAUSE OF THE PLANET'S THIN ATMOSPHERE, LOOKING

THROUGH ORDINARY MILITARY BINOCULARS OF THE PAST COULD EVEN LEAD TO BLINDNESS.

THERE WAS ALSO NO DOUBT SOMETHING WAS GOING ON IN THE ENEMY CAMP. BUT THAT DIDN'T STOP THEM FROM AT LEAST LOOKING. THEIR COVER WAS STILL SOLID ENOUGH FOR THAT PURPOSE. AND IF THEY USED IT REALLY WELL THEY MIGHT EVEN GAIN SOME ADVANTAGE.

FOR A SECOND, THE BEAUTIFUL ORANGE-PURPLE SKY OF ZEGANDARIA CAME BACK INTO THE YOUNG MAN'S SIGHT. IT WAS ALREADY DAWN AND THEY HAD TO HURRY. 'SO UNREACHABLE...' RAN THROUGH HIS MIND. IT WAS AS IF ITS RAW BEAUTY HID ANOTHER, BETTER, UNSEEN WORLD FROM HIS VIEW. A WORLD HE ASPIRED TO WITH THE UNCONSCIOUS LONGING NOT OF AN ADVENTURER, BUT OF A DISCOVERER. A DISCOVERER OF A BETTER LIFE, OF A MORE EXALTED EXISTENCE. IF ONLY THERE WAS A WAY TO GET OFF THIS DAMNED PLANET ONCE AND FOR ALL. IN HIS MIND, IT WAS HARD TO DESCRIBE A GREATER HELL THAN THE ONE HERE. BUT HE HAD A MISSION THAT BROOKED NO DELAY.

HIS GUILTY CONSCIENCE MADE HIM RUSH EVEN MORE. HE HAD TO TRY TO MAKE THINGS RIGHT AN HOUR SOONER. EVEN AT THE COST OF HIS OWN LIFE. THE YOUNG MAN HAD GROWN UP ON THIS PLANET, BREATHING IN THE AIR OF FREEDOM. BUT THAT AIR HAD NOT BEEN FREE FOR A LONG TIME. THAT AIR WAS SUFFOCATING YOU.

SUDDENLY SOMETHING SEEMED TO MAKE KEITH TURN, SOMETHING STRONGER EVEN THAN INSTINCT. MAJOR KEITHROWL HAD STUCK HIS FACE IN THE SAND AND WASN'T MOVING. WITH TWO MASTERFUL LATERAL ROLLS, HE FOUND HIMSELF BESIDE HIM, HIS FINGERS FRANTICALLY SEARCHING THE CAROTID ARTERY TO CHECK HIS BATTLE COMPANION'S PULSE. HE ALSO CHECKED HIS WRISTS, JUST IN CASE. THERE WAS NO DOUBT! EVEN THE SHORT TIME OF A MINUTE OR TWO THAT KEITH HAD FOCUSED ON THE ENEMY HAD PROVED MORE THAN ENOUGH FOR THE MAJOR'S DEMISE. IT LOOKED LIKE A HEART ATTACK. HIS FACE HAD STILL RETAINED ITS RUDDINESS, BUT HAD FOR THE FIRST TIME ASSUMED A SERIOUS EXPRESSION. HIS

FINGERS, HOWEVER, WERE CLENCHED INTO FISTS; EVEN IN HIS ETERNAL SLEEP HE REFUSED TO SURRENDER.

- 'REST IN PEACE,' HE MURMURED SOFTLY, RETRIEVING HIS ZIRAUT 400.

THE MAJOR'S PLASMA PISTOL WAS A BIT OF AN OLD MODEL, BUT IT WAS HARD TO FIND A WEAPON, EVEN OF THE MOST ADVANCED IN ITS CLASS, THAT COULD RIVAL IT IN FIREPOWER. IT CERTAINLY WOULD HAVE BEEN USEFUL. THE WIND HAD CHANGED ITS DIRECTION OF BLOWING, AND THE SAND HAD SLOWLY BEGUN TO OVERWHELM THE WRETCH. KEITH TORE OFF HIS IDENTIFYING PATCHES AND TOOK UP RESIDENCE BEHIND THE DUNE AGAIN. NONE OF THE CAMP HAD FELT ANYTHING. 'I HAVE TO LEAVE SOON.' WAS HIS LAST THOUGHT BEFORE HE JUMPED OFF AND BEGAN TO DESCEND UNNOTICED ON THE OTHER SIDE. HE WAS ENTERING THE ENEMY CAMP...

^^^

KEITH HAD DESCENDED ON THE WINDWARD SIDE, SO NO ONE HAD SENSED HIM. THIS WAS PRACTICALLY A WELCOME SIGHT FOR HIM. BUT THE GROANDUS HAD AN EXCELLENT SENSE OF SMELL AND COULDN'T BE EASILY FOOLED. THEY HAD ALMOST SNIFFED HIM OUT, BUT THE SUDDEN CHANGE OF WIND SAVED HIM FROM BEING DETECTED.

HE TRIED TO FIND THE ROYAL TENT. BUT IT WASN'T SO EASY, NOT BECAUSE HE DIDN'T SEE IT, BUT BECAUSE IT WAS JUST BARELY SNEAKING BETWEEN THE OTHERS. IN A LITTLE WHILE HE WAS BEFORE HER. THE GUARDS WEREN'T ON DUTY FOR SOME REASON. HE WALKED IN.

ON THE THRONE IN FRONT OF HIM WAS ZARAG TU.

- 'WHO ARE YOU?,' HE CALLED OUT.

- I AM THE PARLIAMENTARIAN OF ELMBAUM.

- 'AH,' MEANS GORDON, STILL ACTING LIKE THAT, FROM A DISTANCE.

- 'HE TOLD ME ABOUT YOUR SECRET,' KEITH SAID, SOMEWHAT CALMLY.

- AND DID HE TELL YOU THAT HE IS NOT A LITTLE GUILTY OF A NUMBER OF CRIMES IN CONNECTION WITH THE ORIGIN OF OUR RACE.

- 'DON'T WORRY, I KNOW THAT TOO. THAT THE WAR AT XANDERAR WAS LIKE CHILD'S PLAY WITH THE LAST WAR FOR AU KAKTIR. I'M AWARE OF SOMETHING ELSE TOO. OUT THERE SOMEWHERE,' HE REGRETS IT.

- 'REALLY?,' ZARAG TU GAVE HIM A QUESTIONING LOOK. 'THE HUMAN EXPERIMENTS WERE HIS IDEA. I'M JACOB WALLACE, MY BOY. OF FLESH AND BLOOD. BUT I LOOK RIDICULOUS DON'T I?'

KEITH DROPPED HIS EYES. HE REALIZED THAT DESPITE HIS RECRUITMENT, HE HAD NO MORAL RIGHT TO ANYTHING. IT WAS JUST A THREAD TO PICK UP THE CRUMBLING PIECES OF THIS PLANET. NO MORE, NO LESS.

- 'IF WHAT YOU'RE TELLING ME IS TRUE, THEN MY ROLE IS A VERY SAD ONE,' KEITH SAID CONVULSIVELY, SHAKING.

- I AGREE WITH YOU COMPLETELY. BUT THERE IS ONE CONDITION, YOU MUST TELL ME WHERE GORDON INTENDS TO RUN OFF TO. I KNOW HIM TOO WELL. HIS PERSONAL SURVIVAL INTERESTS HIM FAR MORE THAN MONEY AND POWER. HE DREAMED OF BECOMING SOLE RULER OF THIS PLANET, DID, HOWEVER BRIEFLY.

- BUT YOU ARE SO OLD. KEITH WAS SLIGHTLY CONFUSED, 'HOW IS THAT EVEN POSSIBLE?'

- GORDON IS OVER A THOUSAND YEARS OLD AND I'M ONLY A HUNDRED AND SIXTY. THAT'S BECAUSE OF THE ACCUMULATION OF SO-CALLED SUBJECTIVE TIME IN THE MANY COLOSSAL LEAPS HE TOOK TO BUILD HIS EMPIRE. THE CITIZENS OF ELOHY WERE HAPPY,

BUT UNAWARE OF HIS ILLEGAL TRADE WITH VARIOUS OTHER CIVILIZATIONS AND GALAXIES.

- 'I THOUGHT WE WERE ALONE IN THIS PART OF THE GALAXY,' KEITH SPOKE SOMEWHAT AWKWARDLY.

- 'COMPLETELY UNTRUE,' ZARAG TU OR JACOB WALLACE INTERRUPTED HIM. 'HE WANTED TO MAINTAIN THE ILLUSION OF EXCLUSIVITY THAT WORKED IN HIS EYES. HE WANTED TO WIN AT ALL COSTS. HE WANTED TO BE NUMBER ONE. RUN OVER EVERYONE AND EVERYTHING. AND STAYED ALONE WITH HIS OWN EXCEPTIONALISM. THE LAB IN THE NINTH QUADRANT HAD BEEN CREATED WITH HIS VERY KNOWLEDGE, BUT IT WAS NOT ON THIS PLANET, AS GORDON LIED, BUT IN THE TRUE COSMIC NINTH QUADRANT. GORDON DIDN'T WANT TO RISK ANYONE FINDING OUT WHAT WAS BOTHERING THEM. HIS PLAN FOR DOMINATION WAS IN TOO EARLY A STAGE. PRETTY PROSAIC RIGHT? BUT STILL COMPLETELY TRUE. GORDON COULDN'T HAVE FRIENDS. AT LEAST NOT REAL ONES. HE LIVES ONLY WITH HIMSELF AND FOR HIMSELF. HE'S COMPLETELY SELFISH. BUT HE HAD TO BRING THE WHOLE PLANET TO THIS STATE AND DO SUCH GREAT HAVOC.'

KEITH LISTENED IN SILENCE. HE WAS REALLY CONVINCING HIMSELF THAT THE WAR HADN'T BEEN STARTED OVER SOME KEVLARITE OR INTERRON FUEL, NOR WAS IT RACIALLY BASED, EVEN THOUGH THE GUARRON WERE ARTIFICIALLY GENETICALLY ENGINEERED LIZARD-MEN. AND ALL BECAUSE OF THE WHIMS OF ONE MAN. TOO BAD!

KEITH, HOWEVER, HAD DECIDED TO GO ALL THE WAY.

- 'HOW CAN I HELP YOU, YOUR MAJESTY?,' HE ASKED.

- 'ACTUALLY, THERE IS SOMETHING YOU CAN DO,' ZARAG TU BRIGHTENED. 'I AM THE ONLY ONE WHO HAS A MAP, ALBEIT A VERY, VERY OLD ONE, FOR THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. GORDON DOESN'T KNOW ABOUT THIS LITTLE SECRET OF MINE. HE DOESN'T KNOW THE QUADRANT EITHER. NOR DOES ALMOST ANYONE ON THIS PLANET, EXCEPT THE FUGITIVES WHO NEVER RETURNED.'

- 'SO I HAVE TO FIND HIM,' KEITH ASKED QUICKLY.

SOME FOOTSTEPS OF GUARDS COULD BE HEARD, BUT THEY WERE STILL FAR AWAY.

- 'YOU MUST CONTACT MARK AND HIS FRIENDS,' WALLACE TOLD HIM CONFIDENTIALLY. 'I AM THE VOICE THAT GUIDES THEM. AFTER MY TRANSFORMATION INTO THIS NEW LIFE FORM, THE ARCHANEANS GIFTED ME WITH THE TEAR OF INSIGHT. THANKS TO IT, I GUIDE BOTH MY SONS, NUNDRAG AND KIER ZOH, AS WELL AS MARK AND HIS FRIENDS. YOU MUST FIND GORDON AND PUT THE ARMOR OF SEVA ON HIM. THAT WILL RESTORE THE BALANCE, OR SO I HOPE.'

KEITH LISTENED MOST INTENTLY.

- 'YOUR WILL BE DONE, MY LORD,' HE REPLIED.

ZARAG TU MERELY WAVED HIM THAT HE COULD GO.

- 'I'LL KEEP THE GUARDS AWAY FROM YOU UNTIL YOU LEAVE THE CAMP. IT'S TOO SOON FOR THE WHOLE TRUTH TO COME OUT FOR ALL TO SEE. HERE'S THAT EBON TIARA FOR YOU. PUT IT ON THE HEAD OF THE GROANDUS AND HE WILL LISTEN TO YOU. YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO CROSS THE DESERT ON FOOT.

- 'SO I HAVE TO GO BACK?,' ASKED KEITH.

- NO, GO BACK HOME TO UBUNDER. THEY CAN STILL GET YOU A FLYING MACHINE THERE. ELOHY MUST BE COMPLETELY WRECKED BY GORDON'S AMBITIONS TO SHOW THAT HE'S ALWAYS RIGHT.

KEITH BOWED AND STEPPED CAUTIOUSLY OUT OF THE TENT. TWO OR THREE GROANDS WERE GRAZING ABOUT. HE FLUNG HIMSELF WITH A START ON ONE OF THEM, ALMOST LYING ON TOP OF IT. THE ANIMAL WOULD HAVE TORN HIM ALIVE, BUT THE CHIEF'S GIFT PROTECTED HIM, AND HE BECAME MEEK AS A LAMB.

KEITH SPURRED HIM ON. SO MUCH DEPENDED ON HIM NOW. NONE OF THE GUAROONS WENT AFTER HIM, FOR NONE SAW HIM EITHER. THEY WERE IN THE OTHER PART OF THE CAMP, FULLY OCCUPIED IN

FEEDING THEIR ANIMALS, AND ALSO PLAYING AT THEIR FAVORITE GAME OF 'ORIMO.'

THE DESERT SWALLOWED HIM UP. HE HEADED WITH ALL HIS MIGHT TOWARDS ENSARIAN. THERE WAS THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN: THE POLIS

MARK AND THE OTHERS WOKE UP IN A BRAND NEW PLACE. ALL AROUND WAS BRIGHT AND QUIET, ALMOST FLESHLESS - SO ETHEREAL WAS THE WHOLE SETTING. OUR ADVENTURERS FELT AS IF THEY HAD BEEN REBORN, BUT IN A NEW, BETTER AND FAR SUPERIOR FORM. ALL THE LIGHT AROUND WAS EXACTLY THE SAME AS THE SOLID WHITE CAPE PAUL HAD SEEN IN HIS DREAMS OR WHATEVER IT WAS. THERE WOULD HARDLY BE A HUMAN WORD TO DESCRIBE SUCH A THING.

HAVE WE REALLY CROSSED THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE TWO WORLDS?' THE RAT BARELY SPOKE TO HIS ASTONISHED-TO-THE-BONE COMPANIONS, WHO AT THIS POINT WEREN'T EVEN FULLY ABLE TO COMPREHEND WHAT HE WAS SAYING TO THEM.

- 'BOYS, I'M GOING TO TELL THIS THING TO MY GRANDCHILDREN ONE DAY,' GRANDPA JACK SNAPPED IN HIS TYPICAL COWBOY STYLE. 'I BET THEY WON'T BELIEVE A WORD OF WHAT MY EYES SEE.'

AFTER THE EUPHORIA DIED DOWN, MARK GAVE BRIEF AND PRECISE INSTRUCTIONS TO THE GROUP IN ORDER TO COORDINATE THEIR ACTIONS. THEY WERE IN A NEW, COMPLETELY UNFAMILIAR PLACE WHERE OTHER LAWS OF TIME AND SPACE APPARENTLY RULED. AND THAT SOUNDED REALLY FRIGHTENING AT FIRST. THERE WAS SIMPLY NOTHING OF WHAT WAS GOING ON AROUND THAT DEFIED DESCRIPTION.



THEY WANDERED FOR A WHILE LONGER IN THE DENSE VEIL OF FOG - NO ONE, OF COURSE, COULD TELL HOW LONG! - AND GRADUALLY BEGAN TO MAKE OUT THE DOORS BARELY EMERGING IN THE DISTANCE, LIKE THE GHOSTLY RUINS OF A LONG-SUNKEN SHIP. INTRICATE SYMBOLS WERE ETCHED ON THEM, BUT EACH OF THE COMPANIONS VAGUELY GUESSED THAT WHATEVER HAD CARVED THEM HAD HARDLY DONE SO BY ACCIDENT. BUT ITS HIDDEN MEANING THEY WERE NOT YET ABLE TO FATHOM. ONLY PAUL HAD SOME VAGUE IDEA. THE WORDS OF THE UNFAMILIAR VOICE STILL RUMBLED IN HIS HEAD, SO NEAR AND YET SO FAR.

THE GROUP CONTINUED TO APPROACH IN A STATE OF FULL BATTLE READINESS, AND ALL WERE DOING THEIR BEST TO EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. SUDDENLY PAUL, WHO WAS CALLING FOR THE FIRST TIME, SOFTLY PROCEEDED:

- BOYS, SOMETHING IS WRONG HERE, DON'T YOU NOTICE THAT IT IS TOO QUIET AROUND HERE, AND THE DOORS ARE SLIGHTLY AJAR?

ALTHOUGH THEY WERE ALL AT THE EDGE OF THEIR SEATS, THEY STRAINED THEIR HEARING TO PICK UP EVEN THE FAINTEST VIBRATION. IN VAIN! THE DEAD SURROUNDINGS REMAINED EVER SO LISTLESS AND EXPRESSIONLESS.

- 'TAKE POSITION,' MARK COMMANDED QUIETLY.

- 'LET'S JUST SEND ONE TO CHECK IT OUT,' RAT INTERJECTED. 'I HONESTLY DON'T PARTICULARLY LIKE THIS PLACE. IT DULLS THE SENSES AND YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE SOMETHING MIGHT POP OUT AT YOU.'

- 'MARK LET THAT SOMEONE BE ME,' PAUL UTTERED IN A LOW DETERMINED VOICE, 'REMEMBER WHAT THE VOICE SAID ABOUT ME.'

- 'I'M NOT LETTING MY BEST SNIPER GO WITHOUT HAVING PROVIDED COVER,' MARK OBJECTED. 'IF IT'S GOING TO BE ANYONE, IT BETTER BE ONE OF THE HOSTAGES.'

- 'THEY'VE ALREADY PLAYED THEIR PART WITH THE MINEFIELD. BUT WE'RE DEALING WITH THINGS OF AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT NATURE HERE. THINGS THEY CAN'T FATHOM. THIS TIME, I THINK THEY'LL BE POWERLESS TO HELP US,' ZOLSKY'S VOICE HAD BECOME SIMPLY UNRECOGNIZABLE.

- YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT'S IN THERE, THAT'S TRUE. BUT IT'S TRUE THAT THERE'S NO ONE ELSE IN THE SQUAD WHO WIELDS A SNIPER RIFLE LIKE YOU. IF WE LOSE YOU, THAT WILL PROVIDE US WITH LONG RANGE COVER.

- 'MARK,' SUDDENLY CALLED DURNYAM, WHOM NO ONE EXPECTED TO EVEN FLINCH, DESPITE HIS MERITS IN DEFUSING THAT MINE, HE REMAINED WITH THE STATUS OF HOSTAGE, 'I KNOW WHY THE DOOR IS SLIGHTLY AJAR AND NOT WIDE OPEN.'

EVERYONE WAS STUNNED. EVEN THE HOSTAGES. HOW-HOW COULD THIS YOUNG BOY BE AWARE OF THIS EPHEMERAL WORLD? HE HAD HARDLY BEEN HERE BEFORE. IN FACT, MANY OF THEM DOUBTED THERE WAS ANY SIGN OF LIFE HERE AT ALL, DESPITE THE ELABORATE SYMBOLS ON THE DOORS, AND WERE MORE LIKELY TO SEE IT AS THE ABODE OF CREATURES BEYOND HUMAN CONCEPTION.

- 'IT IS NOT WITH WEAPONS THAT WE MUST ENTER, MARK, BUT WITH A KIND WORD,' HIS EYES GLOWED WITH A SPECIAL RADIANCE AND ACTUALLY HAD AN EFFECT ON THOSE AROUND HIM. 'SO FAR WE HAVE PROVED THAT WE CAN GO THROUGH ALL SORTS OF TRIALS TO GET HERE, SO THE DOORS ARE SLIGHTLY AJAR TO SHOW THE BENEVOLENCE OF THOSE BEHIND THEM TO OUR COURAGE AND DEDICATION, BUT TO OPEN THEM FULLY WE NEED TO REALISE THAT THE END GOAL OF OUR JOURNEY IS IN FACT ITS TRUE BEGINNING.'

- 'I'LL BE DAMNED IF I UNDERSTAND WHAT THIS ONE IS TALKING ABOUT...' THE RAT MUTTERED, CONFUSION READING IN HIS GAZE, 'HE MUST NOT BE WITH EVERYONE. PAUL...'

- 'STAY STILL,' PAUL COMMANDED.

- 'LET'S HEAR WHAT HE HAS TO SAY,' MARK CONFIRMED.

- 'LEAVE YOUR WEAPONS AND GO CALMLY AHEAD,' CONTINUED DURNYAM. 'ONLY THEN WILL THE DOORS OPEN TO ADMIT US. WE ARE IN A HOLY PLACE, LET US SHOW HUMILITY.'

- 'SINCE YOU KNOW SO MUCH, SURELY YOU ARE AWARE OF WHAT THESE SYMBOLS ON THE DOORS MEAN?,' THE FATHER ASKED HIM THOUGHTFULLY.

- 'I HAVE JUST TRANSLATED THEIR MEANING FOR YOU. THEY ARE WRITTEN IN ULTRASITHIAN, A LANGUAGE I KNOW PERFECTLY WELL.,' THE YOUNG MAN ADDED CALMLY.

IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT MARK WAS EXPERIENCING SOME HESITATION, AS WERE THE OTHER SURVIVORS SO FAR, BUT SLOWLY AND GRADUALLY THEY LOWERED THEIR WEAPONS. THEY UNDERSTOOD INSTINCTIVELY THAT THE YOUTH WAS RIGHT. IF THEY WANTED TO KILL THEM, THE ULTRAS WOULD HAVE ALREADY DONE SO. ON THE OTHER HAND, EVERYTHING AROUND WAS SO STRANGE THAT A PERSON WHO CAME TO SUCH A PLACE COULD ASSUME THAT EVERYTHING WAS POSSIBLE HERE.

- 'WELL, WELL, YOU LEAD US THEN,' MARK'S VOICE HAD BECOME SOFT AND SEEMINGLY DISEMBODIED. 'AND WE - WE'LL FOLLOW YOU.'

EVERYONE'S WEAPONS THUDDERED TO THE GROUND IN THE FLESHLESS MIST. THE HANDS THAT HAD SHED SO MUCH BLOOD, INCLUDING INNOCENT BLOOD, RELAXED MEEKLY. THE SOUL - THIRSTING FOR PEACE - BOWED.

THEN, MOST UNEXPECTEDLY, THE DOORS CREAKED AND SLOWLY OPENED.

'I MUST NOT WASTE MY DAYS TRYING TO PROLONG THEM. I MUST USE MY TIME.'

JACK LONDON

^^^

- 'WELL?,' THE VOICE ASKED HIM. 'WAS THAT WHAT HE WAS EXPECTING?'

- 'I NEVER THOUGHT SUCH A THING COULD HAPPEN!,' EXCLAIMED PAUL.

- 'IT'S THE SO-CALLED TIMELINE. OR A SCENE OF INCESSANT REPLAY,' REPEATED THE VOICE.

- 'SO THIS SCENARIO WILL REPEAT ENDLESSLY?,' ASKED PAUL, WHO HAD STUDIED ENOUGH PHYSICS, AND QUANTUM PHYSICS AT THAT.

- YOUR WORK IS ALMOST COMPLETE, BUT ONLY IN ITS FIRST PART. YOU WERE IN THE ROLE OF ATTRACTOR.

- 'HUH? 'WHAT?,' ALMOST SHOUTED PAUL.

MARK AND THE OTHERS WERE ABLE TO HEAR THE VOICE QUITE CLEARLY NOW. THEY DIDN'T NEED SOMEONE TO EXPLAIN TO THEM THAT THIS WAS THE SAME VOICE PAUL HAD SPOKEN TO THEM ABOUT WHEN HE HAD DISAPPEARED FOR A FEW HOURS.

- YOU ARE THE ONE AROUND WHOM THE SYSTEM REVOLVES, AS YOU DETERMINE ITS DEGREES OF FREEDOM.

- 'BUT HOW COULD IT HAVE COME TO THIS?,' SAID PAUL, SOMEWHAT INDIGNANTLY.

- 'IT'S VERY SIMPLE,' THE VOICE REPLIED. 'APART FROM YOUR INNATE TELEPATHIC ABILITIES, YOU BECAME AN IMPORTANT PART OF THIS CAUSAL CYCLE AFTER YOU KILLED VOLTARIAN.'

- 'EXCUSE ME?,' PAUL MUTTERED.

- 'YOU HEARD ME CORRECTLY. YOU KILLED HIM,' THE VOICE REPEATED IN A SLIGHTLY ADMONISHING TONE.

- 'WHO IS HE?,' INTERJECTED HER MARK.

THE VOICE PRETENDED NOT TO HEAR HIM. BUT THIS SILENCE WAS DOWNRIGHT ICY.

- ULTRA CITY IS NOT WHAT JACOB WALLACE TOLD YOU IT WAS. AS YOU CAN SEE FOR YOURSELF, IT'S A ZONE OF PECULIAR ANOMALY IN SPACE-TIME. ACCORDING TO THE ANTHROPIC PRINCIPLE, THERE MUST BE OBSERVERS. THE ARCHANAEANS WERE SOARING HIGH IN THE SKY. THEY WERE MOST COMFORTABLE DOING SO. THE PROBLEM IS, YOU'VE ALREADY KILLED A LOT OF THEM. AND DELIBERATELY AT THAT. FOR WHICH, BY THE WAY, YOU HAVE NO EXCUSE!

- 'YOU MEAN WE BROUGHT ALL THIS IMBALANCE ON OURSELVES JUST BY SHOOTING A COUPLE OF NOTHING AND NO CHICKENS THAT WERE ABOUT TO KILL US,' THE RAT NEARLY SCREAMED. 'WHAT DOES THAT LOOK LIKE? THAT VOICE, IF IT'S GOING TO BE A WHISTLE, SEEMS TO BE MOCKING US MAYBE!'

MARK THOUGHT. AND FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER, HE REFUSED TO TAKE ANY PART IN THE ARGUMENT.

- 'IT IS TOO OBVIOUS THAT THERE IS A HIGHER ORDER THAN THE MATERIAL WORLD IN WHICH WE CURRENTLY FIND OURSELVES,' THE VOICE CONTINUED. 'YOU'VE BEEN OVER HALF THE PLANET, YOU'VE KILLED A LOT OF BASTARDS, YOU CAN EVEN SENSE IT INTERNALLY, AND YOU KEEP DENYING IT. I WONDER IF I SHOULDN'T FEEL SORRY FOR YOU. BUT STILL. HERE THE VOICE BECAME SERIOUS, 'STILL, I'LL TRY TO HELP YOU, AS I DID BEFORE. YOUR WORK ISN'T OVER YET, AND IT WON'T BE OVER SOON.'

- 'YOU'RE TELLING US ABOUT SOME PARALLEL WORLDS,' GRANDPA JACK DARED TO ASK, 'EVEN A COWBOY LIKE ME KNOWS THAT PHYSICISTS PROVED IT CENTURIES AGO. WE CAN EVEN PERFORM

COLLAPSE JUMPS. TO WARP SPACE. BUT ONLY THE PEOPLE IN HIGH COMMAND HAVE ACCESS TO THESE DELIGHTS. WE'RE JUST PAWNS AND CANNON FODDER. NOTHING MORE!

- 'IT'S OBVIOUS YOU KNOW NOTHING. IT'S EVEN OBVIOUS,' THE VOICE UTTERED WITH SOME POORLY DISGUISED TENSION. 'YOU COULD HAVE DIED HUNDREDS OF TIMES. YOU COULD HAVE NEVER EVEN GOTTEN OUT OF THAT SPACE-TIME ANOMALY, RATHER REMINISCENT OF A BLACK HOLE, BUT EXTREMELY DIFFERENT FROM IT. AND YOU KEEP REPEATING THE SAME MISTAKE OVER AND OVER AGAIN. WHY?'

DURNYAM, WHO HAD LED THEM HERE, AND HAD READ THE WRITING ON THE DOOR, WAS ALSO SILENT. HE FELT THE VOICE WAS RIGHT. IT WAS NOT AS THEY IMAGINED IT. QUITE THE CONTRARY.

- 'WELL, TELL US,' SAID MARK, 'IF YOU ARE THE SUPREME MIND, AND WE HAVE COME TO ULTRA CITY TO FIND THAT IT NEVER WAS, IF WE HAVE WILLINGLY OR UNWILLINGLY DONE ALL YOUR BIDDING ALONG THE WAY, AT LEAST TELL US WHERE JACOB WALLACE IS, OR AT LEAST WHAT IS LEFT OF HIM?'

- 'WELL, THAT I CAN NO LONGER TELL YOU,' THE VOICE STAMMERED OPENLY. 'YOU'LL HAVE TO FIND HIM YOURSELF, AND THEN YOU'LL FIND OUT THE WHOLE TRUTH ABOUT WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON AROUND YOU AND WHERE YOU ARE RIGHT NOW. SO FAR YOU HAVE ONLY FOUND OUT HALF. THE BANDAGE IS STILL ON YOUR OTHER EYE AND IS PREVENTING YOU FROM SEEING THE WHOLE PICTURE.'

- 'I THINK IT'S TIME TO GO HOME,' SAM WALLACE CALLED SOMEWHAT UNSTEADILY. 'IT'S OBVIOUS WE'RE NOT GOING TO GET ANY OTHER HELP HERE.'

- 'I THINK WE'VE ALREADY GOT SOME. AND ULTRA CITY DOES EXIST, BUT NOT IN THE MATERIAL SENSE.,' MARK SPOKE QUITE CONFIDENTLY. 'AND WHEN WE FIND JACOB, IF WE FIND HIM, EVERYTHING WILL FALL INTO PLACE AND THE PUZZLE WILL FALL INTO PLACE.'

- 'EXACTLY,' THE VOICE AGREED, AND SAID NO MORE.

THE WHOLE SCENE AROUND THEM COULD NOT BE COMPARED TO ANYTHING THEY HAD SEEN BEFORE. IT WAS ABSOLUTELY INTANGIBLE. IT WAS LIKE THEY WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF NOWHERE. BUT THIS TIME IT COULDN'T BE CALLED 'NOTHING' AT ALL. THEY HAD, APPARENTLY, PASSED INTO THE NEXT INTELLECTUAL LEVEL, AND PERCEIVED THE ENVIRONMENT DIFFERENTLY. THAT IS, IT WAS BECOMING MORE AND MORE MATERIAL, BUT IT REMAINED IMMATERIAL AT THE SAME TIME. IT WAS QUITE DIFFICULT TO DESCRIBE! MAYBE THEY WERE BRAND NEW PEOPLE NOW, MAYBE NOT! WHO KNOWS TIME WAS GOING TO TELL!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN: ELOHY

ELOHY EMBODIED THE MORE PROGRESSIVE VIEWS OF THE WESTERN PART OF THE PLANET, FOR THE LOGIC OF SURVIVAL THERE WAS BUILT ON RAW COMPETITION RATHER THAN BROTHERHOOD AND EQUALITY. THE BUSINESS MODEL OF THIS EMPIRE WAS BORROWED FROM THE ANCIENT ANCESTORS WHO LIVED BEFORE THEM IN THESE LANDS - THE IMMIGRANTS. THE CAPITAL CITY WAS NAMED IN THEIR HONOUR. BUT STRANGE AS IT WAS, THERE WAS NO CONNECTION BETWEEN THESE ANCIENT INHABITANTS AND IT OTHER THAN THE NAME AND THE BUSINESS MODEL MENTIONED. HOW SPECIAL THE CITY ITSELF WAS COULD BE JUDGED BY A FEW CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES THAT IMMEDIATELY STOOD OUT.

FIRSTLY, UNLIKE ENSARIAN, GREENERY WAS NOT ABUNDANT HERE, BUT THAT DID NOT MAKE THE CITY ANY LESS BEAUTIFUL, ON THE CONTRARY IT GAVE IT A KIND OF TECHNOCRATIC CHARM THAT HAD CONTRIBUTED PARTICULARLY MUCH TO ITS REPUTATION AS A SETTLEMENT OPEN TO THE ENTIRE GALAXY. ITS POPULATION WAS SLIGHTLY LARGER THAN THAT OF ITS RIVAL, BUT IT WAS SPREAD OVER AN AREA NEARLY TWICE ITS SIZE. THEREFORE, ULTRAMODERN AND ULTRATALL BUILDINGS AND ALL SORTS OF OTHER CONSTRUCTIONS WERE IN ABUNDANCE AND COULD DEFINITELY

ANCHOR THE GAZE OF ANY NEWCOMER WITH THEIR RAW BEAUTY. THE CAPITAL'S MAIN INCOME CAME FROM TRADE IN INTEROVORE FUEL AND ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE, BUT ALSO FROM COLONIZING CERTAIN RESOURCE-RICH AREAS OF THE PLANET, SUCH AS THE AUTONOMOUS REGION OF SYNTHROS. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING IN WHICH ITS RULERS HAD NEVER SUCCEEDED, NAMELY THE TRANSITION FROM COMMODITY TO INTELLECTUAL CAPITALISM. THINGS WERE STILL TOO MATERIALISTIC, AND RESOURCES WERE DEPLETING FASTER THAN THE GROWING POPULATION.

ANOTHER CHARACTERISTIC WAS THAT ALL BOYS OVER THE AGE OF FOURTEEN WERE REQUIRED TO JOIN A SPECIAL UNIT CALLED THE YOUNG LIONS OF IMGRADON, FROM WHICH, AFTER AN INTENSIVE SIX YEARS OF GRUELING TRAINING AND DRILL, AND AFTER SUCCESSFULLY PASSING AN EXAMINATION, THEY EMERGED AS THE 'ANGELS OF IMGRADON,' THE FOREMOST DEFENDERS OF THE WELFARE AND SECURITY OF THIS PLACE. LAST BUT NOT LEAST, VALOR AND HONESTY WERE HONORED TO A CERTAIN EXTENT, BUT THE FREE EXPRESSION OF FEELINGS WAS NOT. THE YOUTHS COULD NOT PLAY TOGETHER IF THEY CHOSE, BEING TOO BUSY WITH MORE IMPORTANT THINGS TO FILL THEIR TIME, AND CHOSEN BY THEIR PARENTS.

THANKS TO ADVANCED SCIENTIFIC WORK AND RELIANCE ON THE HAPLOID CHROMOSOME SET, ALMOST UNLIMITED POSSIBILITIES WERE AVAILABLE TO REMOVE CERTAIN DEFECTIVE OR NON-FUNCTIONAL GENES IN THE RESPECTIVE HOMOLOGOUS PAIRS, AND PARENTS IN PARTICULAR HAD THE RIGHT TO ORDER THE ISOLATION OF GENES RELATED TO THEIR CHILDREN'S AGING PROCESS. AS A RESULT, EACH FAMILY HAD ON AVERAGE ONE CHILD AND BIRTHS HAD BECOME RELATIVELY RARE. GROWTH WAS ALWAYS PERSISTENTLY POSITIVE, DUE TO THE EXTREME INCREASE IN LIFE EXPECTANCY. WHICH, IN TURN, CREATED SOME ANXIETY. AND PERHAPS RIGHTLY SO!

NO LESS PERPLEXING WAS THE SO-CALLED TRANSPLANTATION OF MEMORIES. PARENTS WANTED THEIR CHILDREN TO BE PROUD OF



THEIR ANCESTORS AND COULD ORDER THIS BEFORE BIRTH ITSELF, WHEREBY TRAINED BIOENGINEERS MADE THE APPROPRIATE ADJUSTMENTS TO THE EMBRYO'S DEVELOPMENT. IT WOULD DEFINITELY SEEM A BIT FRIGHTENING IF SOMETHING WENT WRONG. BUT THE BIRTH CONTROL COMMISSION THAT WAS FORMED FOR THIS PURPOSE WAS THE LINCHPIN OF THIS WHOLE POLICY THAT WAS BEING PURSUED. A POLICY OF EXPANSION AND DOMINATION, BUT ALSO A SENSE OF INSULARITY DESPITE ALL THIS COSMOPOLITANISM.

ANY ALIENS THAT CAME FROM OTHER PARTS OF THE GALAXY WERE WELCOME, BUT NOT CIVILIANS FROM THE OTHER SURFACE POLITIES OF ZEGANDARIA. THEY WERE IMMEDIATELY TREATED AS SPIES AND SUSPECTED. THAT WAS WHY NO ONE DARED TO STEP FOOT IN THE POLIS JUST THEN. THE NARENZIAN CHIPS GUARANTEED FULL TRACEABILITY OF ANY CITIZEN IF MORE SERIOUS SUSPICIONS AROSE OF COLLABORATION WITH CERTAIN ENTITIES OR OF A FORGED CITIZENSHIP. IT WAS JUST ABOUT THE EASIEST WAY TO GET A TICKET TO LEAVE THE PLANET IN THE DIRECTION OF THE DARK QUADRANT, WHERE NO ONE'S JURISDICTION COULD CATCH MISCELLANEOUS FUGITIVES OR CRIMINALS LOOKING FOR A LAST CHANCE TO SURVIVE.

THIS SUPER-DEVELOPED CITY-STATE WAS, AS THE MILITARY TRIBUNAL OF IMGRADON LIKED TO POINT OUT, 'MADE TO LAST.' AND NOTHING WAS ABLE TO UNDERMINE ITS GREATNESS, STRENGTH, AND MOST IMPORTANTLY, ITS FUTURE PROSPECTS OF DEVELOPMENT.

BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE SPECIAL ABOUT ITS ATMOSPHERE, WHICH FILLED THE CHEST WITH A YOUTHFUL CASUALNESS, IF SOMEWHAT SUBDUED BY ALL THE SNOBBERY AND ILL-DISGUISED MILITARY AGGRESSION. IT WAS 'THE FEELING OF A BLUE SPRING.' OF LIMITLESS POSSIBILITIES FOR THE YOUTH WHO WANTED TO DEVELOP. OR AT LEAST THEY THOUGHT THEY COULD. THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT WAS GIVING OUT RATHER LARGE, IF NOT PARTICULARLY SELFLESS, GRANTS FOR ALL SORTS OF PROJECTS. THANKS TO THEM, THE MAERX STREET REFINERIES WERE BUILT. A SIGNIFICANT PART OF THE POPULATION OF THE POLIS WORKED THERE. THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT WAS ANOTHER SIMILAR

EXAMPLE. BOTH PROJECTS WERE THE WORK OF YOUNG AND ENTERPRISING PEOPLE WITH A STRONG DESIRE TO CHANGE THIS PART OF THE PLANET. BUT IT WAS ONLY CLEVER MANIPULATION THAT STIMULATED THEIR GENIUS. LATER, EVERYTHING WAS TAKEN FROM THEM IN THE MOST RUTHLESS WAY, TO BECOME THE PROPERTY OF THE CITY'S SOLE RULER, GORDON ELMBAUM.

LEADERSHIP SKILLS WERE HIGHLY VALUED AND TOLERATED BY THE MIDDLE CLASS OF THE POLIS. THEY WERE ANOTHER OF SEVERAL POSSIBLE PATHS FOR ADVANCEMENT. ALBEIT A FALSE ONE. IT SIMPLY CREATED OBEDIENT PAWNS IN THE HANDS OF THE GOVERNOR OF IMGRADON. PAWNS RULING OTHER PAWNS. IN THEIR OWN MADNESS FOR SUPREMACY AND PROSPERITY.

BUT THERE EXISTED A CATEGORY OF CITIZENS WHO WERE OUTSIDE ITS BOUNDS AND WERE DOWNRIGHT DESPICABLE. NO ONE SPOKE FOR THEM. AND EVEN PRETENDED NOT TO NOTICE THEM. THESE WERE THE MADMEN CONFINED TO ST. JOSEPH'S CLINIC.

YOUNG LIONS OF IMGRADON CADET SCHOOL

TIME: UNKNOWN

LOCATION: UNKNOWN

STATUS: TOP SECRET

^^^

- 'YOU NEED TO HIT THE ENEMY HARDER,' ENSIGN PIERCE SHOUTED TO THE YOUTHS, FORCING WITH ALL THEIR MIGHT THE TRAINING BEANBAGS FILLED WITH QUIZON AND KEVLARITE AND MIMICKING THE HUMAN BODY. - EVEN MY GRANDMOTHER HAS MORE STRENGTH THAN YOU, AND SHE'S DEFINITELY GETTING ON IN YEARS.

- 'WE'RE GIVING IT OUR ALL, SIR,' ONE OF THEM BARELY DARED TO MUTTER.

- 'MOOOO?!, ' ROARED THE ENSIGN. 'WELL APPARENTLY NOT ENOUGH! TRY HARDER,' HE ADDED CLUMSILY.

- NO MORE OF THE GROUP CALLED HER. THE SILENCE WAS DOWNRIGHT MURDEROUS AND DID NOT BODE WELL.

- 'BESIDES, HERE YOU HAVE A SACK OF EVERYTHING AGAINST YOU, AND DOZENS AND EVEN HUNDREDS OF OPPONENTS AWAIT YOU ON THE BATTLEFIELD. NO ONE IS GOING TO ATTACK YOU SINGLE-HANDEDLY, SO GET OFF YOUR ASSES! AND THAT'S AN ORDER!, ' HE FINISHED HIS OMINOUS TIRADE, TURNING HIS BACK ON THEM.

AS THE TRAINING WAS TAKING PLACE IN A WELL-ISOLATED HALL, WHICH PRYING EYES COULD NOT REACH, ALL THIS WAS BEING DONE WITH THE UTMOST EXPEDIENCY, FOR AFTER THE GENERAL PHYSICAL TRAINING, THERE WERE LATER TO BE CLASSES IN SPECIAL MARKSMANSHIP, LASER-CUTTER COMBAT, AND ALSO SOME DIVERSIONARY ACTIVITIES.

- 'AS LONG AS YOU ARE HERE, I WANT YOU TO GIVE ONE HUNDRED AND TEN PERCENT. AND NO THOUGHT OF WOMEN, FUN OR DRINKING,' HIS VOICE BOOMED AGAIN FROM THE OTHER END OF THE HALL AS HE HAD MOVED AWAY TO OBSERVE THE OTHER GROUP'S TRAINING.

THE EYES OF TWO OF THE TRAINERS WERE WATCHING HIM VERY SERIOUSLY AND RESPONSIBLY, AND WHEN THE DISTANCE WAS SAFE THEY STRUCK UP A SUBTLE CONVERSATION.

- 'THIS ONE'S TAKING HIMSELF FAR TOO SERIOUSLY,' DUOLORS MUTTERED DEVILISHLY. AS HE SAID THIS, HE KEPT POUNDING THE SACK AS IF HIS LIFE DEPENDED ON IT. JUST TO MAKE YOU FEEL EXPENSIVE!

- 'MAKE SURE HE DOESN'T HEAR YOU, OR YOU'LL HAVE A FIT,' RODRIGO MUTTERED FROM UNDER HIS NOSE.

- 'SHALL WE DROP IN TO OUR PLACE TO-NIGHT?' TOSSED DUALLERS.

- 'NOT TONIGHT, I HAVE A MEETING WITH BECKY, I'M BUSY,' RODRIGO MUTTERED BREATHLESSLY, 'FIND SOMEONE ELSE TO COME WITH YOU. THERE ARE SO MANY OTHER GUYS HERE. I'M SURE SOMEONE WOULD STILL AGREE TO HAVE A DRINK.

- 'YEAH, BUT THEY'RE NOT FUN LIKE YOU. I'M DEFINITELY GOING TO BE BORED,' DUOLORS TOSSED IN.

- 'SOME OTHER TIME INDEED,' RODRIGO REPLIED SERIOUSLY.

THEY WERE ABOUT TO WRAP UP GENERAL PHYSICAL FITNESS TRAINING AND MOVE ON TO MORE SPECIALISED MARKSMANSHIP AND DIVERSIONARY EXERCISES. CERTAINLY NONE OF THOSE WILLING WERE WILLING TO WASTE ANY TIME, BECAUSE THE SOONER THEY FINISHED, THE SOONER THEY COULD GET DOWN TO THE CITY AS CIVILIANS AND RELAX FOR A WHILE. MOST LIKELY IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN FOR THE LAST TIME, AS THEY WERE NEARING THE END OF THEIR SIX-MONTH INTENSIVE TRAINING PERIOD IN WHICH THEY WOULD BE PUT UNDER THE MOST EXTREME CONDITIONS POSSIBLE BEFORE ENTERING ACTUAL COMBAT. THEIR TRAINING SCHEDULE HAD BECOME RATHER MORE CHAOTIC, BUT NO LESS EFFECTIVE. UNCONVENTIONAL FIGHTERS COULD NOT BE CREATED WITH CONVENTIONAL AND HALF-HEARTED TRAINING METHODS. AND EVEN A JUNIOR INSTRUCTOR KNEW THAT.

- 'RECRUITS, WE'RE RAISING THE PIGEONS,' LAUGHED ENSIGN PEARCE AFTER A MOMENT, COMING AROUND THE CORNER, 'I HOPE YOUR SPIRITS HAVEN'T GOT TOO HIGH. BECAUSE IT'S IN DANGER OF BECOMING EVEN MORE SO...'

- 'AND WHERE ARE WE GOING NOW, COMRADE EPHRAIMITE?,' SOMEONE FROM THE GROUP TURNED AROUND.

- 'BOYS,' HE MADE A MEANINGFUL FACE, 'AND LET ME TELL YOU, YOU WON'T UNDERSTAND ME, BECAUSE YOU'VE NEVER, EVER BEEN THERE.'

- 'RIGHT, SO TRUE, SIR,' THE CADETS SHOUTED IN CHORUS.

NO ONE ELSE GUFFAWED AND ASKED ABSOLUTELY NO QUESTIONS. ON ONE SIDE OF THE HALL AROUND THE SYNCRANIAL HATCHES, WHICH HAD AN ADDITIONAL AND REINFORCED COMMONALITY, WAS WAITING FOR THEM A SPECIAL ZIRUARX (AN ASYMMETRICALLY SHAPED ARMORED PERSONNEL CARRIER WITH A SHIFTED CENTER OF GRAVITY MADE OF SPECIAL COMPOSITES USED ONLY BY THE MILITARY).

- 'THERE WON'T BE ROOM FOR EVERYONE IN IT,' ADDED ENSIGN PIERCE. 'MY WORK IS DONE. BUT WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW RIGHT NOW IS THAT YOU ARE BEING GIVEN THE CHANCE TO CHOOSE WHICH OF THESE ZIRUARXS YOU WILL GO WITH. THERE WILL BE FORTY IN ALL.'

THE BOYS WERE FROZEN IN THEIR POSTURE PEACEFULLY, LISTENING MOST ATTENTIVELY. THIS TURN OF EVENTS WAS RATHER UNEXPECTED, FOR THEIR TRAINING WAS PRACTICALLY OVER, AND IT DID NOT BODE WELL.

- 'YOUR CHOICE OF GENERALITIES WOULD NOT BE VERY GREAT, AS IT WAS A MATTER OF A TIME DIFFERENCE OF AN HOUR OR HOUR AND A HALF UNTIL THE OTHERS ARRIVED.,' HE CONTINUED WITH A LITTLE BOREDOM.

- 'SO WHO WILL BE FIRST?,' HIS VOICE TRAILED OFF SLIGHTLY.

FROM THE GROUP, RODRIGO, DUOLORS AND A FEW OTHER GUYS RAISED THEIR HANDS. NOT TOO VIGOROUSLY AND NOT TOO LANGUIDLY, COMPLETELY IN THE SPIRIT OF MILITARY TRADITION.

- 'WELL, THAT SETTLED THEN, I HAND YOU OVER TO MY COLLEAGUE FOR FURTHER INSTRUCTIONS.,' AS IF TAKING A LOAD OFF HIS SHOULDERS HE UTTERED AND TURNED HIS BACK ON THEM, LEAVING THE HALL THROUGH ONE OF THE SYNTH HATCHES.

- 'I DON'T THINK YOU'LL HAVE TIME TO SEE BECKY,' DUOLORS PRONOUNCED THOUGHTFULLY.

THE SERGEANT WHO EMERGED FROM THE ZIRUARX WAS ONLY SLIGHTLY SHORTER THAN THE BATTERED BUT NONETHELESS TALL BODY OF THE ENSIGN. MAYBE BY ABOUT TWO INCHES. HE HAD A RATHER UNDEFINED FACE, AS IF HE HAD BEEN MOULDED ON A MOULD, AND GENERALLY INSPIRED A GOOD DEAL OF RESPECT. HIS GAZE WAS SLIGHTLY ALOOF, AND IF ONE WERE TO LOOK AT HIM CLOSELY, ONE WOULD OUTRIGHT SCREAM, SO GLASSY WERE HIS EYES. AND YET THE WEARINESS DIDN'T SEEM TO SHOW. HE NIMBLY LEAPT FROM THE OPENING OZARI HATCH, CROUCHED, AND DEFTLY STOOD TO PAY HIS RESPECTS.

- 'HELLO CADETS, I'M SERGEANT ZORIN, WHO ARE WITH ME?,' HE STEPPED TO THE POINT.

RODRIGO, DUOLORS AND THE OTHERS APPROACHED HIM. FROM NOW ON HE WAS THE MAN WHO HAD THEIR DESTINY. AT LEAST FOR THE NEXT TWELVE MONTHS.

- YOU COULD SAY YOU HIT THE JACKPOT. LET'S GO, WE HAVE NO TIME TO WASTE. I'M GLAD WE'RE GOING TO BE TOGETHER.

INSTANTLY EVERYONE CRAMMED INTO THE 'RUMP' OF THE ZIRUARX AND OFF IT WENT. SINCE ITS ENGINE WAS POWERED BY INTERRON FUEL AND NOT ANTI-GRAVITY LIKE THAT OF THE NIRANGAITERS, ITS SPEED OF TRAVEL WAS DEFINITELY LOWER, BUT ITS MANEUVERABILITY AND ABILITY TO FIND FIRE FROM A VARIETY OF ANGLES WAS PROVERBIAL. AND THE INFANTRY TROOPS DEFINITELY BENEFITED FROM THIS FACT TO THE GREATEST EXTENT. IT WAS BECAUSE OF THIS THAT THESE FORMIDABLE FIGHTING MACHINES WERE THE BACKBONE OF FIREPOWER. EACH WAS CAPABLE OF CARRYING UP TO EIGHT MEN AT A TIME AND HAD OXYGEN AUTONOMY FOR UP TO SIX DAYS WITHOUT REFUELING. THE ARMOR WAS CONSTRUCTED OF A SPECIAL COMPOSITE OF KEVLARITE, NANO-BASED CARBON FILAMENTS, AND ALSO SILICON ARONAUT THAT ONLY THE MILITARY HAD ACCESS TO. HOWEVER, THE INSIDE OF THE WAR MACHINE WASN'T ENTIRELY UNCOMFORTABLE, AND IT WAS STILL KIND OF ANNOYING IF ONE WAS USED TO THAT LEGENDARY SPINNING LIKE IN A CENTRIFUGE.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: BECKY

BECKY MORNINGALE WAS CROSSING THE CENTRAL SQUARE OF THE POLIS, WHICH WAS REMARKABLE IN ITSELF, AT A FAST PACE. A DOZEN FEATHERLESS ARCHONS, FOR INSTANCE, SOARED HIGH ABOVE THE BUILDINGS. THEY WERE DRUGGED AND THEIR LEGS WERE BOUND WITH SPECIAL ZERETHIUM THREADS, THIN AS SILK AND STRONGER THAN TITANIUM, LEST THEY ACCIDENTALLY ATTACK PASSERSBY. THIS PECULIAR AND, TO SAY THE LEAST, ECCENTRIC CONTRIVANCE WAS, OF COURSE, A FIGMENT OF THE SICK FANTASIES OF GOVERNOR GORDON ELMBAUM, WHO WAS NOW IN HIS FIFTH TERM OF GOVERNING THE ENTIRE CONURBATION, AND WHOSE MAIN IDEA WAS TO SHOWCASE IMGRADON'S DOMINANCE AS THE NUMBER ONE SUPERPOWER ON THE ENTIRE PLANET!

THE GIRL WAS DRESSED IN A LIGHT AND LOOSE JACKET AND A THIN SHEER DRESS, PERFECTLY APPROPRIATE FOR THE SEASON, BUT SOMEHOW CONTRASTING BRIGHTLY WITH THE ALL-OVER GREY BACKGROUND. SHE WAS CLUTCHING TIGHTLY UNDER HER ARM HER PERSONAL DATA ASSIST, WHICH HAD LONG BEEN CONSIDERED SOMETHING EXTREMELY OLD-FASHIONED BECAUSE EACH USED NEO-RADIO QUANTUM CHIPS COMBINED WITH INTELLIGENT PLASMA GLASS EMBEDDED IN THE RETINA OF THE EYE. BUT SHE WAS A TRADITIONALIST AND DID NOT GIVE IN TO OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE ON WHAT TO USE AND WHAT NOT TO USE. EVEN INWARDLY SHE SECRETLY SCOFFED AT THOSE WHO WERE TOO SLAVISH TO NEW TECHNOLOGY AND DIDN'T TRY TO USE AT LEAST A LITTLE OF THEIR GREY BRAIN MATTER.

HER TRIP TO THE UNIVERSITY WAS BORING, AS IT DIDN'T LAST MORE THAN A QUARTER OF AN HOUR, SO SHE DIDN'T HAVE TOO MUCH TIME TO BE PREOCCUPIED WITH THOUGHTS OF HERSELF. IN ANY CASE, THIS DAY WAS GOING TO PASS LIKE ANY OTHER. AFTER ALL, SO WHAT! HER MOOD TODAY WAS NORMAL AND EVEN GOOD. SHE WAS DEFINITELY IN A HURRY FOR AN IMPORTANT STUDENT EVENT, AS SHE WAS THE PRESIDENT OF A STUDENT CLUB AND AS ITS LEADER, THERE

WAS NO WAY SHE WOULDN'T ATTEND. AT FIRST SHE COULDN'T STAND MOST PEOPLE, FOR THE SIMPLE REASON THAT SHE THOUGHT THEY WERE WASTING THEIR TIME ON NONSENSE INSTEAD OF DOING WORTHWHILE AND INTERESTING THINGS. SOME EVEN THOUGHT SHE WAS TOO NARROW-MINDED AND EVEN LAZY. BUT THAT SIMPLY WASN'T TRUE, SHE LIKED TO GET A LOT DONE WITH MINIMAL EFFORT, AND ANOTHER NAME FOR THAT WAS INTELLECT. THAT WAS WHY HER CIRCLE OF FRIENDS WAS VERY LIMITED. SHE WASN'T THE KIND OF PERSON WHO WOULD JUST ACCOST THE FIRST PERSON SHE MET ON THE STREET AND ASK THEM THE TIME OR WHAT TIME IT WAS AND THAT WOULD BE THE END OF THE WHOLE CONVERSATION. SHE POSSESSED A RICH INNER SOUL AND A WORLD OF HER OWN THAT SHE DIDN'T ALLOW ANYONE INTO, AND THERE WEREN'T MANY WHO WOULD. THE CITY SHE LIVED IN DEFINITELY SEEMED STUPID TO HER, AND WHILE FOR THE MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION ON THIS PLANET IT WAS JUST ABOUT THE COOLEST PLACE YOU COULD FEEL TRULY SUCCESSFUL EVEN IF YOU JUST RESIDED, SHE WAS LOOKING FOR NEW AND UNDISCOVERED HORIZONS. PLACES WHERE NO ONE BEFORE HER HAD SET FOOT.

AS PRESIDENT OF THAT CLUB, HER DUTIES INCLUDED ORGANIZING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GATHERINGS FOR SOME OF THE STUDENTS. BECKY DID THESE THINGS MAINLY BECAUSE SHE WAS OF THE OPINION THAT IT WOULD IMPROVE HER PEOPLE SKILLS, AND IN DOING SO SHE WAS CONTRIBUTING TO SOCIALLY IMPORTANT CAUSES. BUT HER ULTERIOR MOTIVE WAS TO USE THIS MODEST 'POST' AND THE OPPORTUNITIES IT OFFERED TO OPEN THE WAY FOR NEW ADVENTURES AND CHALLENGES. SHE DIDN'T WANT TO RETIRE LIKE EVERYONE ELSE WHO WAS HUSTLING LIKE IDIOTS AT THE INTERRON FUEL REFINERY ON MAERX STREET, THE URUS ONX INTERPLANETARY SPACEPORT THAT WAS OUTSIDE THE ENTIRE CONURBATION, OR THE PLEXONIARX MINES SOME THIRTY-FIVE ZEGANDARIAN MILES NORTHEAST OF IMGRADON. SHE WAS LOOKING FOR ANY POSSIBLE WAY TO 'GET OUT', SHE WAS A SMART GIRL AND AS SUCH IT WAS WELL WITHIN HER CAPABILITIES TO DO SO. THERE



WAS SIMPLY NO TIME TO WASTE. EVERY SECOND WAS PRECIOUS AND PRECIOUS.

ONCE THROUGH THE PLAZA, SHE PULLED INTO ONE OF THE SIDE BLOCKS OF THE MAIN BOULEVARD CONNECTING THE CENTRAL PART OF THE CITY AND THE TOWER DOTTED WITH RIANDAN TERRAFLYERS WHO TAPPED THE ENTIRE AGGLOMERATION AROUND THE CLOCK IN THE NAME OF THE DEMOCRATIC VALUES OF THE POLIS. EAVESDROPPING WAS EVEN RECOMMENDED TO THE CITIZENS THEMSELVES, AND THERE WAS A SPECIAL PRICE LIST WITH SMALL CASH REWARDS FOR ANYONE WHO SLANDERED THEIR NEIGHBOR FOR, FOR EXAMPLE, THROWING THEIR GARBAGE WHERE IT DIDN'T BELONG. IN THIS WAY, ORDER REMAINED INTACT. AND USUALLY NOBODY THOUGHT OF BREAKING IT.

AFTER WALKING AROUND FOR A WHILE, A BUILDING STOOD OUT ON HER RIGHT, WHICH DIDN'T SEEM TO FIT IN AT ALL WITH THE WHOLE SURROUNDINGS. ON THE ONE HAND IT WAS IN THE CENTRAL PART OF TOWN, BUT IT WAS ACTUALLY IN A WELL ISOLATED AND TUCKED AWAY AREA, AND ON THE OTHER IT WAS KIND OF QUIANT AND OLD FASHIONED, OUT OF PLACE AS IF OUT OF FAIRY TALES. IT WAS THE INFAMOUS 'ST. JOSEPH'S CLINIC', WHICH HOUSED THE SOCIAL OUTCASTS, THE PARALYZED, THE MENTALLY ILL, AND ALSO PEOPLE LEFT TO DIE ALONE BECAUSE THEY WERE DECLARED 'HOPELESS'. IT WAS DEFINITELY AN ABODE OF SUFFERING AND HOPELESSNESS, WHICH THE CITIZENS OF IMGRADON QUITE UNDERSTANDABLY AVOIDED. IT DID NOT, AS THEY PUT IT, 'MAKE A GOOD ADVERTISEMENT' FOR THEIR TOWN. AND IN THEIR OWN EYES, THEY WERE RIGHT TO DO SO, AS IT WAS IN KEEPING WITH THE SELFISH-INDIVIDUALISTIC VALUES OF IMGRADON, WHERE PERSONAL SUCCESS WAS ELEVATED TO A PEDESTAL.

BEFORE ENTERING THE BUILDING, BECKY GLANCED UP AT THE SIGN AND A FLASH SEEMED TO PIERCE THE SKY. A HEAVY RAIN HAD BEGUN TO FALL, BUT IT WAS MORE OF AN IMITATION AS GOVERNOR ELMBAUM INSISTED ON THE FACADE AND REALISM OF EACH THING,

NOT CARING ABOUT THE INNER SUBSTANCE OF IT. IN THE END, IT WAS ALL 'ADVERTISING.' AND BUSINESS.

EVEN THOUGH SHE WAS ALREADY LATE FOR HER LECTURES AT THE UNIVERSITY, SHE STILL DECIDED TO DROP BY. HERE SHE'D DO A TWO-WEEK INTERNSHIP, WHICH CONSISTED OF SWAPPING HOSPITAL ELECTRONIC PATIENT RECORDS. SOMETHING RATHER TRIVIAL. BUT IT HADN'T GOTTEN ANY BETTER, AS UNEMPLOYMENT IN THE CITY WAS SIGNIFICANTLY HIGH. THANKS TO HER HIGH GRADES FROM UNIVERSITY, HER OWN WITS, AND NO SMALL AMOUNT OF LUCK, SHE WAS HERE. THERE WAS ANOTHER REASON FOR HER ZEAL, HOWEVER, AND THAT WAS THE FACT THAT IMGRADON'S VISA POLICY DID NOT ALLOW ANY CITIZEN, WHOEVER THEY WERE, TO LEAVE THE CONFINES OF THE POLIS WITHOUT HAVING DONE THE MANDATORY MINIMUM FIFTEEN DAYS OF COMMUNITY SERVICE. COMPLETELY UNPAID. AND THAT WAS IN THE IDEAL CASE. UNDER MORE NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, THE PERIOD GREW TO AS MUCH AS SIX MONTHS, AND IN THE WORST POSSIBLE SCENARIO, COULD REACH A FULL YEAR. THE 'POLIS INTENDANCY' DID NOT LOOK KINDLY ON IDLERS AND INVALIDS, WHOM IT CONSIDERED UTTERLY USELESS TO SOCIETY. IN OTHER WORDS, EVEN A PERFECTLY HEALTHY AND WELL-EDUCATED PERSON WHO FAILED TO PUT IN THE MANDATORY TWO WEEKS UNTIL THE AGE OF TWENTY-FIVE WAS PUT ON A SPECIAL BLACKLIST AND LOST ANY REAL CHANCE OF BEING HIRED BY ANYONE. FOREVER. AND THAT MEANT STARVING TO DEATH!

QUITE A FEW OF THE PATIENTS OF THE HOSPITAL IN QUESTION WERE HERE FOR THAT VERY REASON. BECAUSE THEIR BRAINS COULDN'T CONTAIN THE REASON THEY HAD ENDED UP HERE. NOT THAT THIS WAS WHERE THEY BELONGED. THERE WAS SIMPLY NOWHERE ELSE TO HOUSE AND HIDE THEM FROM THE EYES OF OTHERS.

BECKY ENTERED THROUGH THE RATHER OLD-FASHIONED DOUBLE-LEAF GOTHIC DOOR. BUT BEFORE SHE DID, A THRILL OF EXCITEMENT SEEMED TO CUT THROUGH HER STOMACH. FEELING THAT THE STAKES WERE MUCH HIGHER, SO SHE HAD NO MARGIN FOR ERROR.

'YOU'D THINK I WAS PREGNANT,' SHE THOUGHT JOKINGLY.

AN OLD LADY GREETED HER AT THE FRONT DESK WITH A VERY INDEFINITE SMILE.

- 'BECKY MORINGALE,' THE GIRL INTRODUCED HERSELF WITH A SLIGHT STAMMER.

THE WOMAN LOOKED UP FROM THE NEWSPAPER SHE WAS READING WITH VISIBLE ANNOYANCE. APPARENTLY THIS PLACE WAS THE ONLY PLACE WHERE SUCH THINGS COULD BE SEEN.

- 'AH, ARE YOU THE NEW ADDITION?,' SHE ADDED IN A DRAWLING AND SLIGHTLY ANNOYED VOICE. 'THERE WAS NO NEED FOR YOU TO COME TODAY. PRETENDING TO BE A FREAK. BUT... SINCE YOU CAME, I WON'T BE BRINGING YOU BACK.' SHE SHOT HER A QUESTIONING LOOK, 'YOUR DESIRE TO SURVIVE IS OBVIOUSLY STRONG, SINCE ABSOLUTELY NO ONE ELSE WANTED TO INTERN WITH US. HOW IRONIC, AFTER A FEW YEARS YOU FIND YOURSELF ON THE TOP FLOOR OF THE PSYCH WARD.'

BECKY LISTENED TO THE WOMAN'S FRIGHTENING WORDS WITH A RATHER UNDEFINED, AND FACE HIDDEN BEHIND HORN-RIMMED GLASSES AND RATHER WELL-GROOMED, ALBEIT FALSE TEETH.

- 'YOU WON'T HAVE ANY TROUBLE WITH ME,' BECKY SAID, NOT WANTING TO GET HERSELF INTO ANY UNNECESSARY TROUBLE BEFORE IT HAD EVEN STARTED.

- 'I DON'T DOUBT IT EITHER,' THE WOMAN SHOOK HER HEAD. 'YOUTH IS LIKE A 'BLUE SPRING'. THERE ARE SO MANY PATHS AHEAD OF US, AND EACH ONE SEEMS TRUE. THE TROUBLE IS,' SHE PAUSED BRIEFLY, 'THEY LEAD NOWHERE. WELL, AT LEAST MOST ...'

BECKY DIDN'T BLINK, BUT GAVE THE APPEARANCE OF LISTENING MOST INTENTLY. SHE KNEW SHE SHOULDN'T BE DISTRACTED; MUCH LESS LET IT SHOW.

STARTING THE DAY AFTER TOMORROW - IN THE HOSPITAL WARD ON THE SECOND FLOOR.

- 'How?,' SHE BARELY MURMURED. 'I WAS GOING TO SORT OUT THE ELECTRONIC HOSPITAL RECORDS.'

IF IT HAD BEEN ANYONE ELSE, THE OLD WOMAN WOULD HAVE OBJECTED AND EVEN GONE INTO A RAGE. BUT THEN SHE SAW BEFORE HER A PURE AND GOOD TWENTY-THREE-YEAR OLD GIRL. SMART AND READY TO FIGHT. EVEN IF HIS FIGHT WAS COMPLETELY POINTLESS.

- LOOK WHAT, MY GIRL, YOU DO UNDERSTAND THAT THIS CITY HAS TWO FACES...

- 'I KNOW,' BECKY HASTENED TO REPLY.

- 'NO, YOU DON'T,' THE WOMAN ADDED SADLY. 'I'M HERE, AND EVERY DAY I HEAR THEIR SCREAMS, THEIR MOANS, THEIR WHEEZES. YESTERDAY, FOR EXAMPLE, ONE HUNG HIMSELF FROM ONE OF THE BUILDING'S SYNTERIAL HATCHES.'

- 'BUT ISN'T IT GOTHIC? WHY ARE YOUR HATCHES SYNTERIAL?,' SHE ALMOST HID HER INDIGNATION.

- 'BECAUSE THEY PROVIDE BETTER INSULATION,' THE WOMAN REPLIED CALMLY. 'SOCIETY PREFERS TO PRETEND IT DOESN'T HEAR CERTAIN THINGS.'

^^^

WHEN SHE WAS ALREADY IN FRONT OF THE UNIVERSITY, THE OTHERS WHO HAD RECOGNIZED HER BEGAN TO PICK UP STEAM. SHE HAD BEEN DELAYED FOR OVER A QUARTER OF AN HOUR BECAUSE OF HER DETENTION AT THE CLINIC.

- 'WHERE ARE YOU GETTING LOST?,' WAS THE QUESTION DIRECTED FROM ALL SIDES.

- 'WE'VE RUNG YOUR ULTRAS MANY TIMES,' MEIOR LOOKED AT HER REPROACHFULLY, A YOUNG MAN A HEAD TALLER THAN HER AND THE

ONLY ONE IN THE ENTIRE CLASS WHO OUTCLASSED HER IN KNOWLEDGE.

- 'I DON'T HAVE AN ULTRAPHONE. MY PERSONAL DATA ASSISTANT BROKE,' SHE LIED.

- NEVER MIND, IT'S TIME TO VOICE OUR CLEAN ENVIRONMENT SLOGAN NOW.

- 'DID YOU PREPARE YOUR SPEECH, REMEMBER?,' MEIOR ASKED HER, A LITTLE HURRIED AND INSPIRED.

BECKY WAS READY WITH HER SPEECH MUCH EARLIER, BUT IT ALL SEEMED A BIT POINTLESS TO HER. NOT BECAUSE THEIR CAUSE WASN'T WORTH IT, BUT BECAUSE SHE KNEW HOW ELMBAUM DEALT WITH THE LIKES OF THEM. HE CALLED THEM 'VAIN' AND SET SPECIFIC MEASURES IN ORDER TO NEUTRALIZE THEM.

- 'THE RISK IS WORTH IT,' A GIRL WITH A GINGER GOATEE NAMED REONA CALLED. 'LET'S GO.'

JUST AS THEY WERE ABOUT TO STEP ONTO THE ANTI-GRAFFITI STEPS IN FRONT OF THE CAMPUS RECTORY, THEY HEARD THE ROAR OF ORONIUM BEEPERS. THEIR HOWL MEANT 'ALERT.'

- 'IT'S UNLIKELY THAT ELMBAUM HAS FIGURED OUT OUR INTENTIONS JUST FROM THE RIANDAN TERRAFLETTERS. THOSE ARE PRETTY EXABYTES OF AUDIO. EVEN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE NEEDS TIME TO READ AND ANALYZE THEM AMONG THE HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF RECORDINGS TO FIND SOME OF THE 'DANGEROUS' CODE WORDS,' BECKY MUTTERED IN FRUSTRATION.

SUDDENLY, AS IF OUT OF NOWHERE, PEOPLE BEGAN TO FLEE, SHOUTING, 'A MOMENTARY MARTIAL LAW IS DECLARED!' THE CROWD WAS COMING FROM THE NORTHEASTERN PART OF THE CITY. IT SWEEPED EVERYTHING LIKE A WAVE. IT LOOKED LIKE A HERD OF MAD CATTLE THAT JUST WANTED TO SURVIVE. IN LESS THAN A MINUTE THEY WOULD BE UPON THEM AND RUNNING THEM OVER.

THE GROUP OF 'ADVENTURERS' INSTANTLY LOOKED AROUND AND BEGAN FRANTICALLY SEARCHING FOR SOME SAFER PLACE TO HIDE. BUT THERE WAS NONE.

- 'WE COULD USE THE CURVES OF ONE OF THE BUILDINGS TO CLIMB UP AND WATCH FROM ABOVE,' REONA SUGGESTED.

THEY BEGAN TO CLIMB AND ENDED UP IN A SIDE 'TERRACE' ABOUT TWO METERS OFF THE GROUND. THIS WAS JUST WHAT WAS CALLED A 'BREATHING PASSAGE' BETWEEN THE UNIVERSITY BUILDING AND AN AUXILIARY ANNEX FOR STUDENT PRACTICE.

THE WAVE OF PEOPLE WAS GETTING BIGGER AND BIGGER AND COULD ALMOST HAVE FLOODED HALF THE POLYS. EVERYONE WAS SCREAMING AND FIGHTING, TRYING TO GET FURTHER AWAY FROM THE DANGER. SUDDENLY A POLICE CORDON SET UP ON THE OPPOSITE SIDE OF THE SQUARE. AN INDESCRIBABLE MELEE SPUN OUT BETWEEN THE TWO GREAT MASSES OF HUMANITY, WHICH BECAME A BLOODY MASSACRE.

- 'YOU CANNOT ENTER THE QUARANTINE ZONE. THE WESTERN PART OF THE CITY HAS BEEN SEALED OFF. STAND DOWN OR WE'LL OPEN FIRE.,' ORDERED SOME LIEUTENANT WITH A HOARSE VOICE AND A HELMET OF REINFORCED KEVLARITE.

THE CROWD DIDN'T HEAR HIM AND CONTINUED ITS CHAOTIC RUSH IN THE FORBIDDEN DIRECTION.

- 'GET READY. ONE-TWO-THREE. TAKE OFF THE GUARDS,' THE LIEUTENANT IN QUESTION ISSUED QUICK ORDERS, 'FIRE!'

THE FRAGMENTARY RECOILS OF THE NEUROSHOCK RIFLES SILENCED SOME OF THE MEN. EVEN UNDER MARTIAL LAW, NO REAL PLASMA WEAPONS WERE USED AGAINST CIVILIANS, AND THEY WERE DEADLY. SOME OF THE REAR RANKS WERE TRIPPING OVER THE ALREADY FALLEN. THERE WAS AN INDESCRIBABLE FRICTION.

- 'WE CAN'T GO BACK HOME,' MEIOR CUT IN.

- 'I HAVE AN IDEA OF A SAFE PLACE,' CUT IN BECKY. 'ST JOSEPH'S CLINIC. NOBODY'S GOING TO HEAD THERE. AT LEAST NOT RIGHT AWAY. EVERYONE WANTS TO ESCAPE TO THE MORE CENTRAL WESTERN PART OF TOWN. ALL WE CAN DO IS WAIT FOR THE MOB TO BREAK THE CORDON AND RUN.'

- 'THEY WON'T MAKE IT. THE POLICE WILL HOLD THEM OFF,' REONA FEARED.

- 'WILL THEY?,' CALLED HISOO, A SHORT AND STOCKY, TOPLESS BOY WITH GLASSES.

AS IF TO SUPPORT HIS SUSPICIONS, THE STREAM BEGAN TO FLOOD THE FAR OUTNUMBERED POLICE UNITS.

- 'SIR, THE NEUROSHOCK WEAPON CHARGES ARE RUNNING LOW!,' SOME SOLDIER SQUEALED.

- 'THIS TIME USE THE PLASMA RIFLES!,' THE LIEUTENANT BELLOWED.

- 'BUT THAT'S AGAINST ORDERS!,' THE SOLDIER TRIED TO OBJECT.

- 'GO TO HELL! ACT! I TAKE IT ALL ON MYSELF...,' MUTTERED THE LIEUTENANT.

- 'I CAN'T LOOK,' REONA COVERED HER EYES, BUT BECKY DIDN'T FLINCH. SHE WAS JUST SORT OF FROZEN IN SHOCK.

- 'LET'S GO,' MEIOR URGED THEM, AND THEY BACKED INTO THE NARROW GAP TO THE OTHER STREET. 'THE CLINIC WAS ONLY TEN MINUTES FROM HERE! IF WE MISS REACHING IT, WE'RE DEAD!'

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: GORDON

ELMBAUM WASN'T ECSTATIC EITHER. HE EXPECTED HIS TROOPS TO SHOW MORE PROFESSIONALISM AND DETERMINATION TO DEAL WITH THE ENEMY. HOW COULD THESE IDIOTS BEND LIKE REEDS! A NEW

ELECTION WAS APPROACHING AND ELMBAUM WAS DREAMING OF HIS SIXTH TERM, WHICH WOULD MAKE HIM THE LONGEST REIGNING GOVERNOR IN HISTORY. COULDN'T FIGURE THEM MILITARY GUYS OUT! WHAT WERE THEY DOING WITH SOME CIVILIAN OBJECTS! THEIR JOB WAS TO FIGHT AND SHOOT, NOT THINK! THINKING WAS HIS JOB!

HE INTENDED TO TRY A CUNNING OPTION THAT WOULD BUY HIM EXTRA TIME, EVEN IF IT CAME AT THE COST OF TOO MANY CASUALTIES.

HE SLICED OFF THE TIP OF HIS CIGAR WITH ONE OF THOSE OLD-FASHIONED KNIVES AND TOOK A DEEP DRAG. 'WHAT'S CALLED IS WHAT'S CALLED. WHAT ARE WE EVEN TALKING ABOUT? ABOUT SOME PHILOSOPHIES AND SCRUPLES.' THE WAR FOR THAT KEVLARITE AND INTERON FUEL WAS COMING TO HIM IN SPADES. NOT THAT MONEY DIDN'T MATTER, BUT HE KNEW FROM HIS OWN EXPERIENCE THAT POWER, ABSOLUTE POWER, WAS FAR MORE INTERESTING AND A FAR STRONGER OPIATE.

ACCORDING TO THE SIGNALS GIVEN TO HIM BY THE POLICE CORDONS, THE CROWD WISHED TO HIDE IN THE WESTERN PART OF THE POLIS, WHICH WAS WELL FORTIFIED AND FORMED WHAT WAS CALLED A SECOND PROTECTIVE RING THAT THE ORDINARY CITIZENS OF THE POLIS NEVER HAD ACCESS TO. IT WAS RESERVED FOR THE SENIOR NOMENKLATURA APPARATUS OF THE RULERS. GORDON WAS IN THE THIRD RING, IN THE DUNGEONS OF A HEAVILY FORTIFIED SKYSCRAPER, MORE THAN FORTY METERS DEEP.

'AFTER ALL, COMMUNICATING WITH THE VOTERS CAN SOMETIMES BE DIFFICULT,' HE SMILED.

IN FIVE MINUTES, THE SECURITY CONFERENCE, OF WHICH HE WAS CHAIRMAN, WAS ABOUT TO BEGIN. THE APPARENT CALM OF THE POLIS WAS ALSO HIS IDEA, BECAUSE HE NEEDED SOME TIME TO TRANSFER SOME OF HIS VAST HOLDINGS TO THE SECRET TUNNEL BRANCHES BENEATH HIS OWN SKYSCRAPER. THE ILLUSION THAT THE ARMY WAS THE ABSOLUTE GUARANTOR OF SECURITY WAS ALSO HIS IDEA. THE EVENTUAL ARMAGEDDON COULD KILL SOME OF THE



PEOPLE WHO DISAGREED WITH HIS WAY OF GOVERNING. AND THAT WOULD ONLY STRENGTHEN HIS POWER.

'ONE BULLET, TWO BIRDS,' HE SCRATCHED HIMSELF AND LEFT HIS OFFICE UNDER THE WATCHFUL EYE OF THE GUARDS. 'PLAYING MY CARDS RIGHT WILL GIVE ME AN ENORMOUS POLITICAL ADVANTAGE, EVEN WITHOUT AN ELECTION.'

SIR, THE POLICE CORDONS ARE BROKEN. THEY'RE COMING TOWARDS US. - TRUMPS ONE OF THE MILITARY UNDER HIS DIRECT COMMAND.

WITH WONDERFULLY ACTED SKILL, ELMBAUM EXPRESSED ALARM. EVEN CONCERN. IT WAS FAIR TO SAY THAT HIS NATURE AS A POLITICAL CHAMELEON WAS ABLE TO BUILD AND MAINTAIN A DIVERSITY OF CHARACTERS THAT EVEN SOMETIMES ARGUED WITH EACH OTHER, CAME INTO CONFLICT, BUT ALWAYS COMPLEMENTED EACH OTHER AND NEVER GOT IN EACH OTHER'S WAY IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD. SUCH A LONG POLITICAL CAREER WAS BY NO MEANS A MATTER OF CHANCE. HE WAS SIMPLY A NATURAL TALENT.

- MOBILIZE AS YOU MUST GHOST WARS, BUT STOP THEM, HE CALMLY ORDERED.

- 'BUT, SIR, THEY ARE NOT ONE OF OURS. YOU WANT US TO FIGHT MERCENARIES?,' THE MILITARY MAN TRIED TO OBJECT.

- DO AS YOU'RE TOLD. NO ONE WILL HOLD YOU TO ACCOUNT. JUST ROUND THEM UP. WE HAVE QUITE A FEW CAPTURED SOLDIERS. THEY KNOW WHAT DISCIPLINE MEANS.

ELMBAUM WAS A FINE PSYCHOLOGIST AND KNEW THAT IT WAS FAR PREFERABLE TO TREATING THEM AS DESERTERS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF TREATING THEM AS PRISONERS AND AS MERCENARIES. HE'D GIVEN ANYONE WHO'D SHOWN THEIR LOYALTY TO HIM THE OPPORTUNITY TO RISE QUICKLY IN THE HIERARCHY. REGARDLESS OF HIS PAST. HE'D QUICKLY ELEVATE THEM, AND EVEN MORE QUICKLY HAVE THEM STUCK IN THE MUD HE'D PULLED THEM OUT OF EARLIER.

INCIDENTALLY, TOO MANY PROBLEMS WERE CREATED PRECISELY BY THE MUDDLED MINDS OF SOME OF THEM. THEY HAD TO REALIZE THAT THEY HELD THEIR FATE IN THEIR OWN HANDS. THAT WAS GORDON'S METHODOLOGY, AND IT USUALLY PROVED TO BE A WINNING ONE.

- 'GET THEM ANY EQUIPMENT THEY NEED,' HIS VOICE BOOMED AS HE LEFT.

GORDON ENTERED THROUGH THE SOLID MAHOGANY DOOR INTO A SITTING ROOM. A SITTING THAT COULD LAST UNTIL TOMORROW EVEN. HE HAD TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE DETAILS. AS WELL AS HIS NERVES!

HE HAD A TOUGHER BATTLE AHEAD OF HIM FOR THE CONFIDENCE OF THE CONTINENTAL CONGRESSMEN, THE SECOND GOVERNING BODY AFTER THE WAR COUNCIL. WITHOUT THEM, HE WOULD NOT BE ABLE TO LAUNCH A DIRECT ATTACK WHERE HE MOST DESIRED. IN THE HEART OF THE CITY. HIS PLAN WAS TO WREAK HAVOC AND MANAGE TO MOVE OUT BEFORE IT WAS TOO LATE.

TOO BAD HE COULDN'T MISS THE GATHERING.

^^^

ELMBAUM DEFINITELY KNEW HOW TO WAGE POLITICAL WARFARE AND ALSO NEGOTIATE. THE PROBLEM WAS THAT EVEN A GOVERNOR NEEDED THE SO-CALLED 'THREADS OF POWER' TO BE THE BASIS OF HIS RULE. HE DIDN'T LIKE THAT AT ALL, BUT AS A WELL-TRAINED MANAGER, HE WAS WELL AWARE OF THE INEVITABILITY OF THAT FACT. AND HE ACCEPTED IT. NO, ACTUALLY, HE DIDN'T ACCEPT IT, BUT HE HAD LEARNED TO PRETEND TO BE HAPPY! SO WHAT! MANAGEMENT COULD HAVE SOME 'PRICKLY SIDES'. APPARENTLY HIS IDEA OF 'COMPLETE HAPPINESS', WHICH HE ASSOCIATED WITH 'COMPLETE POWER' AND NOTHING ELSE, WAS NOT POSSIBLE.

AROUND THE NEGOTIATING TABLE WERE ALL THE OLD ACQUAINTANCES AND THUGS WHO HAD A STRONG INTEREST

ESPECIALLY IN THE INTERRON FUEL, WHICH WAS THE ONLY RESOURCE THAT REALLY MATTERED, WITH THE MARTIAL LAW THUS CREATED. EVEN KEVLARITE WAS LOSING ITS VALUE FOR A REASON IN A WAR OF NERVES SUCH AS THEY WERE PLANNING TO PLAY OUT.

GENE PALEY STOOD BEHIND ONE END OF IT, WHICH WAS A COMBINATION OF COMPOSITE ELEMENTS AND HOLOGRAPHIC DECORATIONS. HIS FAITHFUL ADJUTANT ISONGDAR WAS ALSO IN THE CORNER AT A RESPECTFUL DISTANCE. HE WASN'T VERY ENTHUSIASTIC HIMSELF, AND DEFINITELY FELT OUT OF PLACE, EVEN THOUGH HE WAS THE FIRST ADVISOR TO SUCH AN IMPORTANT MAN AS THE GOVERNOR. BUT HE WOULD BE ONE OF THE LINKS IN ELMBAUM'S PLAN TO CONTACT THE GENERAL. STILL, THE CONFLICT OF INTEREST WAS OBVIOUS, BUT ONLY TO THOSE PRESENT HERE. ISONGDAR WAS NOT AN OFFICIAL ADVISOR, BUT HE WAS AN ADJUTANT TO A FULL STAFF.

THE INTENDANT MEMBERS WERE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TABLE, ELMBAUM HIMSELF ON THE THIRD. THIS WAS THE BASIC IDEA OF THE TRINITY OF POWERS - POLITICAL, MILITARY AND ADMINISTRATIVE AND OPERATIONAL. THROUGH DEFT MOVES, ELMBAUM HAD MANAGED TO KEEP HIS SKIN IN THE POLITICAL ARENA AND SECURE OBEDIENT PAWNS. FEW WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT THE ECO-PROTESTS WERE HIS DOING. IT WAS HARD TO GET A DOZEN STUDENTS TO SHOUT FOR HIS CAUSE, BUT HE FOUND THEM. ALL THE OTHERS WHO HAD STEADY JOBS AND SKILLS HAD MOVED OUT OR WERE LIVING IN LESS ACCESSIBLE AREAS OF THE POLIS. BUT HE STILL NEEDED SOME OPPONENTS. AND SINCE THERE WERE VIRTUALLY NONE, HE'D HAVE TO CREATE AND MODEL THEM HIMSELF. HE WOULD EVEN TRAIN THEM TO ARGUE AND FIGHT WITH HIM. OR PERHAPS MORE ACCURATELY FOR HIM AND HIS INTERESTS. HE WOULD HAVE HELPED THEM 'VEGETATE' AND SURVIVE ALMOST FOREVER IN A PERFECT CYCLE. BY 'PROTECTING' THEM, HE WAS ACTUALLY PROTECTING HIMSELF. THINGS WERE QUITE CONNECTED, AS SQUISHY AS IT SEEMED. HE WAS JUST FOLLOWING HIS OWN PATH. HE HAD NO CONTEMPT FOR PALEY OR THE MEMBERS OF THE INTENDANT, NOR DID HE CONSIDER THEM BENEATH HIM, BUT HE WAS ALL TOO DETERMINED TO DO

EVERYTHING IN HIS POWER BUT NOT BECOME THEIRS. IT WAS JUST THAT THE SITUATION AS IT WAS WAS CHANGING HIS PLANS A LITTLE.

'NOTHING WILL DISTRACT ME.,' HE MENTALLY TOLD HIMSELF. 'THEY CAN TALK ALL THEY WANT, AND TRY ALL SORTS OF MEANS. I KNOW ALL THEIR NUMBERS, AND THEY KNOW MINE, BUT I READ THEIR MINDS COMPLETELY, AND THEY DON'T READ MINE COMPLETELY.'

GIVEN THE EXTREME CONDITIONS, THERE WAS LITTLE PREAMBLE OR UNNECESSARY EMOTIONAL VERBIAGE. THESE WERE BUSINESS MEN AND THEY WERE DECIDING IMPORTANT BUSINESS MATTERS.

PALEY STARTED FIRST. HE THOUGHT HE HAD PREPARED HIMSELF WELL AND WOULD DEFEND HIS CAUSE TO THE END.

- THE SITUATION WAS SERIOUS. THE PARTIAL BREAKING OF THE SECOND FORTIFIED RING SPEAKS TO THE FACT THAT THE THIRD IS COMING NEXT, AND THEN WE ARE.

- 'THERE IS NO ROOM FOR PANIC, GENE,' THE CHAIRMAN OF THE INTENDANT ADDRESSED HIM DIRECTLY. 'YOUR PEOPLE WILL DO THEIR JOB PROPERLY. I'M CONFIDENT.'

- 'DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING TO OBJECT TO, GOVERNOR ELMBAUM? OR DO YOU HAVE A SUGGESTION TO MAKE?,' THE VOICE TURNED TO THE GOVERNOR WITHOUT CIRCUMLOCUTION.

ELMBAUM HAD ASSUMED A SOMEWHAT GOOD-NATURED AND CALM EXPRESSION, HIS GAZE FIXED AS IF ON NOTHING. HE STOOD THUS FOR ABOUT TWO OR THREE SECONDS.

- 'GENTLEMEN,' HE BEGAN QUITE BUSINESSLIKE, 'IT SEEMS TO ME THAT NO ONE HERE REALIZES THAT THIS HAS LONG SINCE BECOME A WAR FOR EXISTENCE, AND NOT ONE OF IDEALS AND SO ON. THE CONFLICT HAS LONG SINCE BEEN OVER THAT INTERRON FUEL. NOR IS IT ABOUT THE GUARRONS ...'

- 'MAKE YOURSELF CLEAR,' ISONGDAR ALMOST SNARLED, DRAWN OUT IN TYPICAL SOLDIERLY FASHION. HE WAS STARTING TO TURN

PALE, BUT HE WAS STILL TRYING TO CONTROL HIMSELF. GENE PALEY'S DIGNITY PREVENTED HIM FROM SPEAKING DIRECTLY, SO HIS ADJUTANT WAS THE CONVENIENT PAWN FOR THAT PURPOSE.

- 'ALL I'M SAYING IS, IF THESE PEOPLE WANT TO GET TO US, LET THEM,' THE GOVERNOR CONTINUED CALMLY, 'WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?'

ALTHOUGH HE HAD SEEN A LOT ON THE BATTLEFIELD, GENE PALEY GAVE HIM A SOMEWHAT PECULIAR LOOK.

- 'WHY DID YOU ORDER US TO DO THE OPPOSITE JUST A FEW HOURS AGO?,' HE STAMMERED, FILLED WITH SOME RESENTMENT. 'THE ENTIRE POLIS IS NOW IN BLOOD AND FILTH!'

- 'BECAUSE A FEW HOURS AGO THE SITUATION WAS DIFFERENT,' ELMBAUM WAS EXTREMELY LACONIC.

- 'EXCUSE ME, GORDON,' CALLED CONGRESSMAN CHRIS ZONRETHIS, 'DON'T YOU HAVE SOME BETTER SOLUTION OR SUPER EVACUATION PLAN?'

HE WAS A DIGNIFIED MAN OVER FORTY-FIVE. AND HE HADN'T DONE ANYTHING ELSE OUTSIDE OF POLITICS.

- 'NO, I HAVE SOMETHING BETTER,' ELMBAUM NODDED MEANINGFULLY.

- 'AND WHAT'S YOUR BRILLIANT IDEA?,' ZONRETHIS ASKED IMPATIENTLY.

- 'SEE THE TRANSITION BETWEEN THE SECOND AND THIRD RINGS?,' CONTINUED GORDON, POINTING TO ONE OF THE HOLOGRAPHIC IMAGES HOVERING IN THE AIR ABOVE THE CONFERENCE TABLE. 'THERE, YOUR FIGHTERS,' HE TURNED, BUT WITHOUT LOOKING DIRECTLY AT PALEY, WHO WAS FROWNING SLIGHTLY, PRIMARILY BECAUSE HE DIDN'T GRASP THE POINT OF THE GOVERNOR'S WHOLE GAME, 'WILL MAKE A CONTROLLED MICRO-BLAST OUT OF THE EMBEDDED ESONIUM BLANKS OF THE COMBAT DETONATORS. WHEN

THE HUMAN WAVE PASSES THAT TRACK, THEY'LL FALL INTO THE OPEN CRATER!'

- 'IMPOSSIBLE,' PALEY ALMOST SHOUTED, 'SO YOU WANT TO OPEN A CRATER TO THE UNDERGROUND GEOTHERMAL VENT WE USE TO POWER THIS PART OF THE POLIS! THIS IS PURE MADNESS!'

- 'LISTEN TO ME CAREFULLY,' ELMBAUM SAID QUIETLY. 'I HAVEN'T BEEN IN THIS POSITION FOR FIVE TERMS JUST NOW. THIS IS OUR ONLY CHANCE TO SURVIVE!'

- 'HOW LONG WILL IT TAKE FOR THIS WAVE TO WASH OVER US?,' CALLED CHRIS ZONRETHIS AGAIN.

- 'NO MORE THAN THREE HOURS. AT MOST FOUR ...,' ADDED ISONGDAR, WHO WAS WELL INFORMED BY HIS INTELLIGENCE.

- 'IF THE GHOST WARRIORS SQUEEZE BY THEN,' GORDON ADDED WITH A TOUCH OF IRONY, 'WE CAN'T RELY ON THEM ALONE.'

- 'AND THE PROTON MISSILE LAUNCHERS?,' CALLED ADMIRAL PALEY. 'STILL, THEY'RE AN OPTION TOO.'

- 'NO, THIS MASS OF MEN MUST BE BURIED ONCE AND FOR ALL,' PALEY STRETCHED HIS GRIN WRYLY. 'OTHERWISE WE'LL ALL HAVE OUR HEADS BLOWN OFF BY THE UNCONTROLLED PERIMETER OF THE EXPLOSIONS. THE PLATFORMS HAVE CODES THAT CAN'T BE ACTIVATED WITHOUT CAUSING A MICRONUCLEAR EXPLOSION. THEN WE HAVE NOWHERE TO RUN!'

- 'I'M SENDING THE BOMB SQUAD TO THE DUNGEONS IMMEDIATELY,' ISONGDAR TRUMPETED.

- 'THE SPEEDERS ALSO NEED TO BE IN READINESS TO WITHDRAW AND LEAVE IMGRADON,' ADDED ELMBAUM.

- 'WHERE ARE WE GOING?,' THE ATTENDEES CALLED OUT.

- 'THIS IS TOP SECRET UNTIL THE LAST MINUTE! CARRY OUT ORDERS!,' CUT IN ELMBAUM, LEAVING THE ROOM.

AAA

- 'GOVERNOR ELMBAUM,' WHISPERED GENE PALEY'S ADJUTANT. 'I HAVE CARRIED OUT YOUR ORDERS. SOON THERE WILL BE NO TRACE OF THIS CITY-STATE.'

- 'YOU STILL OWE ME SOME THINGS, ISONGDAR,' ELMBAUM REPLIED, A LITTLE WISTFULLY. 'REMEMBER THAT YOU ARE DEPENDENT ON ME TO A DEGREE FROM WHICH THERE IS NO MOVING.'

- 'I KNOW, BUT GENE PALEY IS PROBABLY THE ONE PERSON I CAN'T TAKE ANY STEP FORWARD WITHOUT. THAT'S WHAT REALLY BOTHERS ME. IT'S GOING TO BE HARD TO FOOL HIM. HE ALREADY SUSPECTS ME,' THE ADJUTANT TRIED TO SHUSH.

- 'THE ADMIRAL WON'T BE COMING INTO OUR PLANS VERY SOON,' ELMBAUM REPLIED CALMLY, 'MY JOB IS TO GET HIM OUT OF THE WAY. WHEREVER WE GO, HIS VOICE WILL NO LONGER BE HEARD.'

- 'I WILL CONTINUE TO PLAY MY PART WELL. BY THE WAY, YOUR IDEA OF GOING TO THIS PARTICULAR PLACE IS ALMOST INGENNIOUS,' THE ADJUTANT CONTINUED.

- DON'T FLATTER ME, PLEASE. I'M JUST DOING WHAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN DONE LONG AGO. NOW LEAVE ME ALONE. BY THE WAY, THERE'S ONE MORE THING. I HAVE A STRONG SUSPICION WE'RE MISSING SOMETHING SOMEWHERE. TRY TO FIGURE OUT WHAT. AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. LET THE OTHERS THINK WE'RE DRAGGING OUR FEET ON THE FINAL PREPARATIONS. ONLY THE TWO OF US WILL KNOW THE TRUTH.

- 'IN THE MEANTIME, SHALL I SEND AN ORDER TO CLOSE LABOR COLONY 206?', HE ASKED SOMEWHAT CAUTIOUSLY.

- NATURALLY, ONLY NOT IMMEDIATELY. CHRIS ZONTRETIS WILL BE AN IMPORTANT PART OF OUR PLAN. WE MUST TREAD CAREFULLY. GENE PALEY'S ALREADY PRETTY VULNERABLE WITHOUT A LOT OF HIS PEOPLE, WHO WE SENT FOR GREEN SPAWN ANYWAY. THIS WAR AS A WHOLE IS A COMPLETE FARCE. BUT OUR PERSONAL SURVIVAL

IS NOT. WE MISSED THE STUDENT MOVEMENTS, THOUGH. CONTACT THE BORDER POSTS AND TELL THEM TO SHOOT ANYTHING THAT MOVES AND PREPARES TO LEAVE TOWN, EVEN IF IT'S IN UNIFORM. WE'LL LEAVE THEM LIKE PIGS TO THE SLAUGHTER.

ISONDAR NODDED SILENTLY. MORALITY WAS A RATHER STRETCHED CONCEPT. BUT HE WAS A SMART MAN.

- 'AND LASTLY,' THE GOVERNOR ADDED, 'GET THE CAPTURED ARCHANEANS. CAPTURE THEM WITH ZERITH NETS OR WHATEVER YOU FIND, BUT TAKE THEM.'

THE GOVERNOR'S RICHES WOULD BE DUTIFULLY LOADED ONTO A SPECIAL SPACE-CARRIER PLATFORM THAT WOULD DEPART SEPARATELY FROM THE SHUTTLES. IT SOUNDED MIND-BOGGLING THAT SUCH VAST WEALTH WOULD BE FLYING AROUND WITHOUT LIVE SUPERVISION, AND ITS ONLY SECURITY WOULD BE THE LIORIAN ALGORITHM GUIDES WHO WOULD ACTIVATE THE PLATFORM'S SECURITY SYSTEM. BUT THE GOVERNOR WAS COUNTING ON THE SHEER CHAOS ALL AROUND. STILL, ISONGDAR COULD HAVE BETRAYED HIM AS WELL, AS HE HAD HIS PREVIOUS EMPLOYER.

- 'THAT'S WHY POLITICS IS A DIRTY BUSINESS!,' HE WHISPERED, SOMEWHAT INDEFINITELY.

SPECIAL NANOROBOTS WERE LOADING THE VARIOUS VALUABLES INTO COMPARTMENTS ON THE TRANSPORT PLATFORM'S FUSELAGE. THERE COULD BE SEEN ALL SORTS OF JEWELS, SUCH AS FEATHERS FROM ARCHANAANS, RARE ELURIAN SKINS STOLEN FROM GUARRON CHIEFTAINS AND EVEN KINGS, A VAST AMOUNT OF GALACTIC CREDITS, AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST ENOUGH ZEGANDARIAN CRYSTALS. THERE WERE ALSO SOME STRANGE THINGS THAT COULD NOT BE CALLED JEWELS, BUT WERE PLACED IN ABSOLUTE SECRECY AND SEALED AWAY SEPARATELY. NO ONE BUT GORDON KNEW EXACTLY WHAT THEY WERE.

- 'WE MUST HURRY,' THE ROBOTS WERE SAYING AMONG THEMSELVES, 'THE GOVERNOR HATES ANY DELAY.'



TO BE PRECISE, THEY POSSESSED NO EMOTIONS, YET THEY ONLY SHOOK AS IF TREMBLING WITH TERROR LEST THEY SHOULD VIOLATE HIS ORDERS. THE LIORIAN GUIDE-ALGORITHMS HAD AN IMPORTANT OTHER FUNCTION. INSTANT SHORT-CIRCUITING WOULD BE THE PUNISHMENT FOR ANY OF THEM IF THE ALGORITHM WAS NOT EXECUTED PRECISELY TO THE SMALLEST DETAIL. THE CREATION OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE MIMICKING FEELINGS WAS LONG AGO INVENTED. BUT REAL HUMAN EMOTIONS COULD NOT BE COPIED COMPLETELY. IT WAS SIMPLY UNTHINKABLE.

CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS ALSO PREPARING FOR THIS JOURNEY INTO THE UNKNOWN. AS A HEREDITARY CONGRESSMAN, HE KNEW THAT WHEREVER THEY WENT, WHATEVER THEY TOOK NOW WOULD REPRESENT HIS ENTIRE FORTUNE IN THE FUTURE. NO POSITIONS OR TITLES WOULD APPLY IN THEIR NEW HOME.

HE WAS TALL AND TOO SOPHISTICATED. PERHAPS THE MOST SOPHISTICATED NON-ARISTOCRAT RESIDING ON THE POLIS. HE WASN'T AS RICH AS THE GOVERNOR, BUT HIS RICHES WERE INHERITED, NOT STOLEN. AT LEAST FROM HIS POINT OF VIEW, THAT WAS A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE.

OF THE THREE, ONLY GENE PAILEY HAD SMIRKED HARD ENOUGH, BUT HE WAS TRYING HIS BEST TO HOLD HIS GROUND. HE WAS UNDER NO ILLUSION THAT THEY WERE TRYING TO ISOLATE HIM, BUT WITH THE PSYCHE OF AN EX-MILITARY MAN, HE HOPED HE COULD COPE ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO WORK OUT SOMEHOW. HE HAD NO RIGHT TO SLACK OFF. HE COULDN'T KEEP ISONGDAR ON A LEASH LIKE A DOG. HE WAS A SENIOR MILITARY ADMINISTRATIVE ASSISTANT WHO WAS BECOMING MORE IMPORTANT AS THE SITUATION CHANGED. BUT ONE THING BURNED HIS BRAIN, AND THAT WAS WHERE THEY WERE GOING. IT CERTAINLY WASN'T TO LABOR COLONY 206, NOR TO SOME BACKWATER PART OF THIS PLANET, AS THEY WOULD BE LEAVING SOON, BUT WHAT WERE THE OPTIONS THEN. ONE OF THEM FLASHED THROUGH HIS MIND. PERHAPS THE GOVERNOR WAS PLAYING A TRIPLE GAME. ON THE ONE HAND HE HAD CREATED THE CONFLICT, THOUGH NOT ENTIRELY

INTENTIONALLY AS THERE WERE OTHER EXTRANEEOUS FACTORS. ON THE OTHER HAND, SOMEWHERE IN THERE HAD APPEARED NOT-SO-OBVIOUS SIGNS OF HIS INTENTIONS. WHAT IF HE JUST WANTED SOMETHING ELSE. MAYBE HIS WEALTH WASN'T THE ONLY THING HE WAS INTERESTED IN?

## CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE CRAZIES

'WHEN A MADMAN CANNOT BE UNDERSTOOD BY OTHER MADMEN, HE SIMPLY REMAINS A MISUNDERSTOOD MADMAN.'

BUKOWSKI

GETTING TO THE CLINIC DIDN'T SEEM SO SIMPLE. THEY HAD TO WATCH OUT FOR SENTRIES, RAMPAGING CIVILIANS, AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST, GHOST WARRIORS - MARAUDERS - ROAMING THE CITY. THE GOVERNOR HAD GIVEN THEM CARTE BLANCHE TO DO ANYTHING BUT CONTAIN THE SITUATION.

THE IRONY WAS THAT THESE WERE ELOHYN CAPTURED SOLDIERS, PARDONED AND RECRUITED TO HIS CAUSE. ANYTHING WAS TO BE EXPECTED AFTER SUCH A DUBIOUS 'AMNESTY'. THE MEGALOPOLIS LOOKED LIKE AN ASH HEAP, AND UP UNTIL A FEW HOURS AGO IT HAD BEEN A RELATIVELY PLEASANT PLACE TO LIVE DESPITE ITS GRANDIOSE ATMOSPHERE AND HYPOCRITICAL MORALITY UNDER WHICH ONLY CERTAIN PEOPLE THRIVED. IN THAT SHORT SPAN OF TIME, THEY ONLY MANAGED TO PASS A FEW SHORTCUTS. YET THEY WERE FINALLY BACK IN FRONT OF THE HOSPITAL IN QUESTION. STRANGELY ENOUGH, IT STOOD ALMOST INTACT, SAVE FOR THE SLIGHTLY WARPED SURFACE OF ONE OF THE SYNTH HATCHES. THE SHOCKWAVE OF THE MICROCELLULAR ESONIUM BOMBS DID NOT FORGIVE EVEN MADNESS!

- 'DON'T YOU THINK THE MAD WOULD BE DELIGHTED TO HAVE US AS DEAR GUESTS?', VENTURED HISSOU.

- 'GO ON, UNTIL THE SENTRY HAS PASSED AND SHOT US ON THE SPOT LIKE DOGS,' ADDED MEIOR TENSELY. 'WE HAVEN'T A SECOND TO LOSE!'

THE HYDRON DOOR WAS OF COURSE FIRMLY BOLTED AND NO MATTER HOW HARD THEY KNOCKED NO ONE OPENED IT. THE IMITATION RAIN CONTINUED TO POUR DOWN OVER THEIR HEADS. WHO KNOWS WHY THE ARTIFICIAL EERIE ATMOSPHERE MADE NO IMPRESSION ON THEM. THEY HAD SEEN MUCH MORE FRIGHTENING AND EVEN GROTESQUE PICTURES A LITTLE EARLIER. THEY HAD WITNESSED A COMPLETE LACK OF MORALITY AND RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS THE CIVILIAN POPULATION OF THIS POLIS ON THE PART OF ITS OWN SOLDIERS WHO WERE SUPPOSED TO PROTECT IT FROM THE ENEMY. MOREOVER, WHO HAD SWORN TO DO SO! WHAT ELSE WAS THERE TO SEE?

- 'HEY, YOU, SHOW YOUR ELECTRONIC IDENTIFICATION CARDS! OR AT LEAST THE NARENZIE CHIPS ON CIVILIANS! AND NO UNNECESSARY MOVEMENTS!,' THEY SUDDENLY HEARD A GRUFF VOICE BEHIND THEM.

HISU STARTED TO TURN AROUND CAUTIOUSLY, BUT EVEN THAT SLIGHT MOVEMENT SEEMED TOO ABRUPT FOR THE GRUFF VOICE. BY THE TIME HE CAME TO, HE HAD FALLEN SUBDUED BY SEVERAL PLASMA BLASTS. HIS NAIVE CHILDISH FACE HAD LOST ITS NATURAL FLESH COLOR. HIS EYES WERE QUICKLY EXTINGUISHED, BUT HE REMAINED LYING THERE, LIKE A RESTLESS CHILD CURLED UP IN A BALL LIKE A KITTEN, WHO WOULD JUMP UP AT ANY MOMENT AND RUN OFF IN SOME DIRECTION TO DO PRANKS. IT ALL HAPPENED SO QUICKLY! THE LITTLE BODY THUMPED IN THE MUD ALMOST NOISELESSLY, AND SEEMED TO BLEND INSTANTLY WITH THE SURROUNDING GREYISH AND SOMBRE TONE. IT JUST BECAME ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE, BUT IF ONE WERE TO LOOK INTO THE EXTINGUISHED EYE SOCKETS, WHICH WERE SIMPLY FRIGHTENING, ONE WOULD READ SOME GOOD-NATURED REPROACH.

THE OTHERS JUMPED INTO DIFFERENT CORNERS AND SCRAMBLED, TRYING TO PROTECT THEMSELVES, WITH A PRIMAL ANIMAL INSTINCT FOR SURVIVAL, LIKE WOUNDED ANIMALS FACING SLAUGHTER.

- 'WHY ARE YOU MAKING THIS SO DIFFICULT?,' A STRANGE VOICE SLIPPED INTO THE DARKNESS, FILLED WITH MILD ANNOYANCE. ITS OWNER'S FACE, HOWEVER, COULD NOT BE SEEN.

THE SPLINTERS HAD MANAGED TO WOUND ONE OR TWO OF THE STUDENTS, BUT NOT TOO SERIOUSLY. BUT THIS TIME THEY HAD ADDED POISONOUS AMBRAN GAS TO THE PLASMA, WHICH COULD KILL YOU INSTANTLY. OF COURSE THE SOLDIERS HAD DELIBERATELY DILUTED IT AND IT WAS NOW CAUSING THEM FRANTIC AGONY, DESPITE THE SUPERFICIAL INJURIES TO THEIR LIMBS.

- 'WHAT CAUSE ARE YOU FIGHTING FOR?,' THE VOICE TOSSED IN WITH A SUBTLE SNEER. 'IF I WERE YOU, I WOULD STEP ASIDE AND TRY TO BEG FOR MERCY...'

SUDDENLY A NOISE INTERRUPTED THESE REFLECTIONS. AN EMPTY BEER CAN THUMPED AGAINST THE LEGS IN THE DIRECTION OF THE VOICE. A LITTLE LATER AN OLD SOFA CAUSED A SORT OF COMMOTION AMONG THE ALMOST INVISIBLE WARRIORS. THEY HADN'T PRACTICED BEING PELTED WITH COUCHES. IN FACT, NONE OF THEM HAD EVEN SEEN A REAL ONE IN THEIR LIVES.

SUDDENLY A NOISE INTERRUPTED THESE REFLECTIONS. AN EMPTY BEER CAN THUMPED AGAINST THE LEGS IN THE DIRECTION OF THE VOICE. A LITTLE LATER AN OLD SOFA CAUSED A SORT OF COMMOTION AMONG THE ALMOST INVISIBLE WARRIORS. THEY HADN'T PRACTICED BEING PELTED WITH COUCHES. IN FACT, NONE OF THEM HAD EVEN SEEN A REAL ONE IN THEIR LIVES.

SUDDENLY, THE BOLTED HYDRON DOOR BARELY CREAKED OPEN, AND BECKY AND MEIOR, WHO HAD BEEN CROUCHING, SAW IT UNEQUIVOCALLY AS SALVATION. THEY JUMPED! IMMEDIATELY! BUT BECKY WAS FASTER AND MEIOR WAS CARRIED AWAY BY HER MOMENTUM. THE GHOST WARRIORS MANAGED TO FIRE, AND ONE

SPLINTER LICKED HIS LEG. THE SEARING PAIN REACHED HIS SKULL, AND HE FELT A STRANGE LIGHTNESS AND WEIGHTLESSNESS.

THE DOOR CLOSED. RATHER, IT SLAMMED TOO SHARPLY. AS SOON AS THEY TURNED AROUND THEY NOTICED THAT THE SAME OLD WOMAN WHO HAD GIVEN HER THE PECULIAR 'INTERVIEW' EARLIER THE DAY BEFORE WAS WATCHING THEM.

- 'DIDN'T I TELL YOU EARLIER TODAY DARLING, THAT SOONER OR LATER EVERYONE ENDS UP ON THE SECOND FLOOR OF ST. JOSEPH'S CLINIC?', SHE HAD LOOMED OVER THEM RATHER ANXIOUSLY, 'BUT SOMETIMES IT'S THE ONLY WAY TO GET YOUR SANITY BACK.

MEIOR, WHO WASN'T FEELING WELL, JUST FAINTED. THOUGH HE WAS A BORN FIGHTER, THE PAIN IN HIS WOUNDED LEG, THE KILLING FATIGUE AND OVEREXERTION CAME TO HIM IN SPADES.

^^^

- 'I DON'T LIKE YOU, MEIOR,' SASIA ADMITTED TO HIM HONESTLY. 'YOU'RE NOT MY TYPE. I'M IN LOVE WITH RODRIGO. HE KNOWS WELL WHAT HE'S DOING. BUT HE MAY NEVER COME BACK FROM THE FRONT.'

- 'I DIDN'T MAKE YOU LOVE ME, BECKY,' THE YOUNG MAN STAMMERED IN A STRANGE WAY. 'I JUST PROPOSED. SO WHAT?'

- 'EVERYTHING CHANGED IN A MATTER OF MINUTES, AND YOU HAVE NO IDEA HOW MUCH HAPPENED WHILE YOU WERE KNOCKED UNCONSCIOUS BY THE PAIN. YOU HAVE TO BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU SAY. THE CRAZIES - THEY HELPED US,' SHE POINTED WITH A SOMEWHAT INDEFINITE HAND.

THE ATMOSPHERE IN THE MADHOUSE WAS SOMEWHAT MALEVOLENT, BUT NOT THREATENING. JUST STRANGELY MYSTICAL, SINCE THE ENTIRE BUILDING WAS SEALED OFF ON ALL SIDES AND THEY WERE IN LIKE A TIN CAN. IT WAS PRETTY GLOOMY.

- 'SEE WHAT, I'LL FORGET AND ASSUME YOUR RAMBLINGS ARE CAUSED BY THE PAIN,' SHE ADDED.

MEIOR GRITTED HIS TEETH. A NEW CONVULSIVE SPASM SHOOK HIM.

- 'WHAT IF IT NEVER COMES BACK?,' HE ASKED CAUTIOUSLY.

- 'IF IT DOESN'T COME BACK, I'LL DEVOTE MYSELF TO JOURNALISM. I LOVE INFORMING PEOPLE ABOUT WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON. THERE'S NOTHING TO LIE ABOUT. OUR GOVERNOR IS CLEVERLY USING THE WHOLE SITUATION TO JUGGLE THE FATES OF SO MANY PEOPLE. BUT SOONER OR LATER, HE WILL GET HIS JUST DESERTS TOO. 'DON'T DOUBT IT,' SHE MOVED THE TOPIC OF CONVERSATION AWAY SLIGHTLY.

- BECKY, WE NEED TO GET OUT OF HERE. AND I CAN'T EVEN GET UP. I'M HURT. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO? YOU COULD SAY WE DON'T HAVE A WEAPON EITHER!

- I'M NOT LEAVING YOU. YOU SAVED BOTH OF US. I OWE IT TO YOU, PARTNER! YOU DID YOUR DUTY.

THIS TIME MEIOR SAID ABSOLUTELY NOTHING. AND BETTER.

THE CRAZIES STOOD SILENTLY BOUND IN THEIR HOSPITAL BEDS, WHICH WEREN'T VERY FAR FROM THEM. THEY HAD TO BE ON THEIR GUARD THOUGH. THESE PEOPLE HAD BECOME SO INVESTED IN THEIR ROLES AS PATIENTS THAT THEY WERE ALREADY PLAYING TOO SERIOUSLY. THEY WERE DOWNRIGHT DANGEROUS.

MRS. EDWATER HAD TIED THEM UP CAUTIOUSLY BECAUSE THEY WERE TOO MUCH. OUTSIDE VISITORS WERE AS RARE AN OCCURRENCE AS RAIN FALLING IN THE MIDDLE OF A DESERT. SHE DID HER DUTY CONSCIENTIOUSLY. AND UNQUESTIONINGLY. IN THE SAFETY OF THEIR OWN BEDS, THE CRAZIES WOULD BE FAR MORE COMFORTABLE THAN OUTSIDE. OUT THERE IN NORMAL CIVILIAN SOCIETY, THEY SIMPLY HAD NO CHANCE OF SURVIVING.

- I NEVER IMAGINED THERE WAS SUCH A PLACE IN OUR CITY. AND UNDER OUR NOSES. WHAT A JOB!' MUTTERED MEIOR, 'STRANGE CHOICE OF ESCAPE FROM REALITY. BUT THOSE GHOST WARRIORS MUST STILL BE LURKING OUTSIDE. THEY WON'T GIVE UP UNTIL THEY CATCH US. AND WE HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO GET OUT. IT'S GETTING TO BE QUITE A STALEMATE AS WE'RE DRILLED RIGHT NOW. I DON'T SEE A WAY OUT.

- 'WE'LL FIGURE SOMETHING OUT,' BECKY ENCOURAGED HIM.

- 'RODRIGO'S A BRAVE BOY!' SNEERED MEIOR, 'BASS INSIST THEY'VE BEEN SENT FOR GREEN CAVIAR WHILE THESE MARAUDERS ARE RUNNING AMOK HERE. THAT'S PRETTY MEAN,' HE INDIGNANTLY SAID.

- 'WHAT IS TO BE DONE?' SHE AGREED.

THEY WERE BOTH STARVING. THEY WERE ALSO TORMENTED BY THIRST. THEY NEEDED TO DRINK SOME WATER. AND SATISFY THEIR HUNGER.

MRS. EDWATER WAS QUITE KIND THIS TIME. AND SHE TRIED TO GIVE THEM HER FULL COOPERATION AS BEST SHE COULD. NOT ONLY DID SHE HELP IN BANDAGING MEIOR'S LEG, BUT ALSO IN DISINFECTING THE WOUND WITH THE SIMPLEST RIVANOL. EVEN IN THE FUTURE, NO ONE WAS GOING TO SPEND MONEY ON MODERN MEDICATION. ESPECIALLY FOR CRAZY PEOPLE!

MISS EDWATER'S STRANGE BEHAVIOR COULD BE EXPLAINED IN PART BY THE FACT THAT HER SURVIVAL NOW DEPENDED TO SOME EXTENT ON THEIR STRANGE QUIRKS OF GETTING INTO CONFLICTS WITH THE MARAUDERS LURKING OUTSIDE. SHE WASN'T GOING TO OPEN THE DOORS IN ANY CASE.

- 'YOU DON'T HAVE MUCH CHOICE!,' SHE CUT IN. 'IF YOU COME OUT, YOU'LL BE SHOT IMMEDIATELY! IF YOU DON'T - YOU'LL JUST STARVE TO DEATH. WE CAN'T FEED YOU. WE ONLY FEED THE INSANE WITH GORENAI HIRAS AND ELENDRANS. THIS BROKE FROM THE GENEROUS HEART OF OUR GOVERNOR AND THE BUDGET OF THE POLIS.'

- 'THEN WHY DON'T YOU HAND US OVER TO THOSE SCOUNDRELS AND BE DONE WITH IT,' MEIOR CUT IN. 'THERE'S NOTHING TO DRAG IT OUT. HAND US OVER AND THAT'S THAT!'

- 'I WON'T DO IT,' SHE SPOKE ENTHUSIASTICALLY. 'YOU WERE THE FIRST TO LOOK UPON MY CHARGES AS HUMAN BEINGS. YOU ARE THE WAY TO THEIR SALVATION.'

- 'SHE MAY HAS GONE COMPLETELY MAD. WE NEED TO BE SAVED,' BECKY WHISPERED. 'BUT AT LEAST IT MIGHT BE OF USE.'

- 'ISN'T THERE A BACK ENTRANCE, OR AN UNDERGROUND WAREHOUSE?,' ADDED MEIOR, HOPE IN HIS VOICE.

- 'THERE'S SOMETHING BETTER,' SHE SAID CRYPTICALLY. 'BUT YOU'D HAVE TO BE BRAVE ENOUGH TO GET IT. YOU HAVE TO EARN YOUR OWN DELIVERANCE. IT WON'T COME TO YOU WILLINGLY.'

- 'UNDERSTOOD,' REPLIED MEIOR. 'I WILL DO WHAT IS ASKED OF ME, AND I WILL NOT BE A BURDEN TO YOU. WITH THAT WOUNDED LEG.'

- 'OH, NO, MY DEAR,' SOMEWHAT BREAKING THE STRICT FORMALITY OF MISS EDWATER, 'YOU JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TALKING ABOUT. NO ONE IS A BURDEN AS LONG AS THEY HAVE THE WILL TO SURVIVE. AND EVEN THEN, GOD WILL NOT LOOK AWAY FROM US.'

- 'I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND YOU,' MEIOR SAID, SOMEWHAT STRANGELY.

- 'BUT I THINK YOU UNDERSTAND ME PERFECTLY. RELAX, EVERYTHING WILL FALL INTO PLACE. THIS UNIVERSE DOESN'T WISH US DEAD, BUT IT DOESN'T KEEP US FROM PERISHING EITHER. IN FACT, IT IS QUITE INDIFFERENT TO OUR DECISION WHETHER WE SURVIVE OR NOT. BUT WE CERTAINLY CHOOSE WHETHER TO MAKE OUR LIVES MEANINGFUL,' SHE FINISHED SOMEWHAT TOO CALMLY.

OUTSIDE, THE SAME ARTIFICIAL STORM THAT WAS GOVERNOR ELMBAUM'S VERY PRIDE CONTINUED TO RAGE. AND THERE WAS A REASON WHY! HE HAD DEVOTED SO MANY RESOURCES TO



MAINTAINING THE ILLUSION OF IT. AND THINGS, AS WE KNOW, WERE MUCH MORE PROSAIC. YOU ONLY HAD TO HAVE THE RIGHT FRAME OF MIND TO SEE THEM. IT WAS A PITY THAT THAT WAS WHAT SEEMED SO STRANGE TO SO MANY PEOPLE.

IT WAS HARD TO BE OMNIPOTENT IN THE MIDST OF SO MUCH SADNESS AND DESPAIR. IT WASN'T A LIE TO SAY THAT MANY PEOPLE EVEN REACHED FOR THEIR LIVES WITHOUT THINKING. MRS. ELMBAUM WAS USED TO VARIOUS SITUATIONS LIKE SLIT VEINS, SCATTERED SKULLS AND WHATNOT. BUT SHE STILL CARRIED OUT HER JOB UNQUESTIONINGLY AND CONSCIENTIOUSLY.

THEY WENT DOWN TO A GROUND FLOOR WHERE EVERYTHING WAS QUITE SPECIAL. BELOW THE MADHOUSE WAS AN OFFSHOOT OF THAT GEOTHERMAL VENT THAT GOVERNOR ELMBAUM HAD ORDERED BLOWN UP. PRACTICALLY THE WHOLE TOWN WAS ON TOP OF IT. BUT WHAT WAS WORTH NOTING WAS THAT THERE WERE ALSO SECRET TUNNELS THAT LED OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF THE POLIS. AND ONE OF THE EVACUATION TUNNELS IN PARTICULAR WAS UNDER THE ST. JOSEPH CLINIC.

THERE WAS NO MISTAKING IT, OUR ADVENTURERS WERE NOT AT ALL FOND OF THE ESCAPE ROUTE IN QUESTION. IT WAS TOO DANGEROUS TO DESCEND TO SUCH GREAT DEPTHS, ESPECIALLY AS THEY HAD NO REAL PROTECTIVE SUITS EITHER. FORTUNATELY, THEY HAD TO GO NO MORE THAN A FEW HUNDRED METERS AND THEY WOULD BE OUTSIDE THE CONFINES OF THE POLIS. AS WAS WELL KNOWN FROM PHYSICS, THE HEAT OF SUCH VENTS WAS FORMED AS A RESULT OF THE DECAY OF NATURALLY OCCURRING RADIOACTIVE ELEMENTS, AND WHEN THE TEMPERATURE BECAME TOO HIGH, IT BROKE THE SURFACE LIKE A GEYSER.

THIS WOULD PRACTICALLY MEAN INSTANT DEATH.

- 'WELL, I WISH YOU LUCK,' SAID MISS EDWATER, HER SERIOUS FACE NOT LOOKING PARTICULARLY HOPEFUL. 'YOU HAVE A REAL CHOICE OF GETTING OUT OR BOILING ALIVE! BUT AT LEAST IT'S A WAY OUT! NOW, I'M CLOSING THE HYLIRON VALVE AND THE HYDRON DOOR THAT

HIDES IT. YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO GO BACK. GOOD LUCK! AND GOODBYE! YOU WERE GOOD COMPANY!"

THE TWO OF THEM TOOK OFF INTO THE UNKNOWN ALONE.

WHO WOULD HAVE GUESSED THAT BENEATH THE RUINS OF THIS POLIS LAY A WHOLE COMPLEX SYSTEM OF UNDERGROUND TUNNELS, AND OF COMPLETELY NATURAL ORIGIN? GEOTHERMAL VENTS WERE A NATURAL THING FOR THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA, BUT THEY WERE LOCATED AT TOO GREAT A DEPTH. THEY SERVED AS A MAJOR ENERGY RESOURCE AND WERE AN ALMOST INFINITE SOURCE OF POWER. WHAT COULD ORIENT THEM IN THE DARKNESS WAS THE LIGHT OF A USELESS FLASHLIGHT THAT MEIOR HAD ACCIDENTALLY TAKEN WITH HIM. IT HAD SOME PECULIAR PHYSICAL PROPERTIES, SUCH AS THE LIGHT THAT EMANATED FROM IT DID NOT DISSIPATE AS IN THE WELL-KNOWN LANTERNS OF THE DISTANT PAST.

SUDDENLY THEY HEARD A SOUND OF FOOTSTEPS.

- 'THE GOVERNOR SAID TO PLANT MORE EXPLOSIVES,' CALLED A PARTICULARLY GRATING AND IRRITATING VOICE.

- 'SO WHAT? IT'S MOVING OUT OF HERE! WHAT DOES HE CARE!,' REPLIED THE FIRST VOICE. 'EVERYTHING FALLS INTO PLACE ONE WAY OR ANOTHER. ISN'T THAT RIGHT, COMRADES!' HE ADDRESSED THEM RATHER AMIABLY. - BE CAREFUL WITH THE BLANKS!"

SOMEWHERE FAR AHEAD OF THEM CAME THE SOUND OF SOMETHING HEAVY LANDING. THE ESONIAN DETONATORS WERE DEFINITELY WORTH DESCRIBING. THEY WERE A RATHER UPGRADED VERSION OF SOMETHING SIMILAR TO A CAPSULE DETONATOR. THE SENSITIVE EXPLOSIVE WAS CALLED AN EZONE C213, AND THE BREMSSTRAP EXPLOSIVE WAS AN ORDINARY EZONE C206. THE FORMER HAD A HIGH IMPACT SENSITIVITY AND THE LATTER HAD TREMENDOUS IMPACT POWER.

THE GOVERNOR HAD MADE A GOOD CALCULATION OF WHAT HE WAS DOING. HIS SAFE DEPARTURE FROM THE PLANET WAS ASSURED.

THE TWO DID THEIR BEST TO PASS UNNOTICED BY THE MEN. IT WAS QUITE DANGEROUS, AS THE LIKELIHOOD OF BEING CAUGHT WAS ENORMOUS.

MEIOR GRABBED HER ARM. BECKY DIDN'T FLINCH THIS TIME.

- ON THREE. JUMP!

THEY MANAGED TO DART INTO THE ADJACENT GALLERY, WHERE IT WAS DEVILISHLY QUIET. MEIOR HAD LOST THE FLASHLIGHT, SO THEY CONTINUED ON IN TOTAL DARKNESS. THERE WAS NO WONDERING WHICH WAY TO GO, AS THE DARKNESS THAT LAY BEFORE THEM WAS BLACK AND BLUE. THEY JUST PROCEEDED CAUTIOUSLY INTO THE DARKNESS. IN THE DISTANCE, A BRIGHT DOT COULD BE SEEN.

AFTER SOME MORE WANDERING, THEY HAD EMERGED FROM AN ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLE OPENING, AND THE VAST ELANDON FIELD THAT SURROUNDED IMGRADON STRETCHED OUT BEFORE THEM. THEY WERE ALMOST SAVED! THEY CROUCHED DOWN AND RUSHED AS FAR AWAY FROM THAT CURSED CITY AS THEY COULD! HOPEFULLY, AT LEAST IN THE UNKNOWN, THEY FOUND SALVATION!

## CHAPTER TWENTY: KIER ZOH

- 'WAIT, MY DEAR BROTHER,' SAID KIER ZOH THROUGH HIS TEETH, CROUCHING BESIDE A QUAINLY SHAPED STONE, 'WAIT UNTIL I HAVE DISEMBOWELED YOU AND RESTORED OUR ANCESTORS TO GLORY ONCE AND FOR ALL.'

THE PRINCE WAITED FOR HIS FELLOW ZONTRAG, WHO WOULD REPORT TO HIM WHAT WAS HAPPENING IN THEIR CAMP. HE HIMSELF WAS IN DANGER THAT FIRST DAY. BUT AS OF TOMORROW, HE HAD COMPLETE FREEDOM AND THE RIGHT TO SETTLE HIS ACCOUNTS AND PUT ON HIS HEAD THE CROWN HE FELT WAS HIS DUE.

QUITE A NUMBER OF CHILDHOOD MEMORIES SURFACED BEFORE HIS EYES. HIS BROTHER WAS ALWAYS MORE FAVORED IN GAMES WITH HIS COMPANIONS. HE HAD ALWAYS BEEN THEIR FATHER'S FAVORITE, TOO. AND HE WAS LIKE A THORN IN THEIR SIDE, BEING SPARED SO MANY THINGS JUST BECAUSE HE WAS A PRINCE.

- 'LET ME JUST SURVIVE UNTIL TOMORROW,' HE HISSED.

MORE THAN TWO HOURS PASSED AND THERE WAS NO SIGN OF ANYONE APPEARING. THE PRINCE HAD DONE HIS BEST TO MOVE AWAY FROM THE CAMP AND HIDE WELL. HE KNEW THAT IF HE MISSED HIS CHANCE IT WOULD COST HIM HIS HEAD. AND HE DIDN'T FEEL LIKE DYING AT ALL.

SUDDENLY SOME STIRRING WAS NOTICED AND A SLIGHT MURMUR WAS HEARD. THE NOBLEMAN WAS CROUCHED TO WINDWARD, AND WHOEVER WAS COMING TOWARDS HIM WOULD BE AT A DISADVANTAGE. THE INFRARED SENSOR ON THE LASER CUTTER HUMMED SOFTLY. KIER ZOH WAS STARTLED. IT COULD ONLY MEAN THAT ONE OF THEIR OWN WAS APPROACHING HIM. THE SENSORS WERE A SIMPLE SYSTEM FOR TRANSMITTING SIGNALS FROM A DISTANCE. THE GUARRON HAD STOLEN AND CLEVERLY USED SOME OF THE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY OF THE HUMANS, THOUGH THIS WAS ALMOST PREHISTORIC BY ZEGANDARIAN TIME STANDARDS.

'ZONTRAG, YOU SON OF A BITCH, DID WE AGREE TO WARN ME WITH SOME SORT OF SIGNAL. IF I KILL YOU, IT'LL BE YOUR OWN FAULT.,' THOUGHT KIER ZOH.

BUT WONDER WHY THE FOOTSTEPS SEEMED TO STOP. KIER ZOH BEGAN TO SWEAT. HE WANTED TO JUMP UP AND STICK THE BLADE IN THE INTRUDER'S NECK, BE IT HIS OWN CO-CONSPIRATOR, BUT SOMETHING MADE HIM UNABLE TO EVEN MOVE.

'OR HAS HE COME UP WITH SOME DASTARDLY PLAN?,' THE PRINCE WONDERED, GRIPPING THE HILT EVEN TIGHTER, ASSUMING A COMBAT 'PLOUGH' STANCE. THIS FIGHTING STANCE, WIDELY USED BY THE WARRIOR GUAROONS, ALLOWED FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT AND

THE ABILITY TO PARRY BLOWS IN AN ORDERLY RETREAT. ONE COULD BOTH SLASH AND PARRY.

THEY MUST HAVE FIGURED OUT HIS PLANS. KIER ZOH KNEW HIS BROTHER'S INTELLECT WELL, AND HE WAS DEFINITELY NOT TO BE UNDERESTIMATED.

SUDDENLY, A PLAYFUL FIGURE APPEARED FROM BEHIND THE ROCK. IT LOOKED FAR TOO SLENDER TO BE THAT OF A MAN. YET SHE WAS WELL PUT TOGETHER.

THE PRINCE GAPPED. IT CERTAINLY WASN'T ZONTRAG, NOR WAS IT HIS BROTHER. BUT THEN WHO DARED TO COME HERE?

- 'I COME TO YOU UNARMED,' HE HEARD A VOICE THAT WAS TOO UNAMBIGUOUS.

- RAS TIAN!

KIER ZOH LOOKED AT HER IN DISBELIEF. WHAT WAS SHE LOOKING FOR HERE?

- I DO NOT COME TO BEG YOU TO SPARE MY BROTHER'S LIFE, FOR I KNOW THE RULES OF THE DANCE OF DEATH. OUR TRADITION IS UNBREAKABLE. BUT HAVEN'T YOU LOST SOMETHING LATELY?

THE NOBLEMAN PURSED HIS LIPS TESTILY, STILL CLUTCHING THE HILT OF HIS WEAPON. 'HOW DARE HE BLACKMAIL ME?' HE WONDERED.

- 'YOU'RE OBVIOUSLY MISSING SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT,' RAS TIAN CONTINUED WITHOUT EVEN BATTING AN EYE AT HER.

KIER ZOH WAS IN NO HURRY TO ANSWER, AS HIS FACE WAS HIDDEN BENEATH THE HOOD OF ELURIAN SKIN, AND THE FACT THAT HE WORE A MASK PREVENTED HER FROM SEEING THE STRETCHED, DEVILISH, FRIGHTENING SMILE ON HIS FACE.

- 'I MAY HAVE TAKEN SOME PRECAUTIONS AFTER ALL,' HE HISSED.

- 'BUT WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO AFTER YOU BECOME KING?', SHE ASKED HIM SOMEWHAT CASUALLY.

- NOTHING IN PARTICULAR, EXCEPT TO PLACE THE GUARRONS UNDER MY POWER AND RESTORE THEIR DIGNITY. THE HUMAN ARMY IS DEFEATED, ALBEIT WITH MY BROTHER'S HELP, WHICH MAKES MY TASK EVEN EASIER.

- 'YOU'RE VERY MUCH MISTAKEN,' RAS TIAN OBJECTED IN A TONE THAT TRULY STARTLED HIM. HER CONFIDENCE COULDN'T BE MISTAKEN.

- 'IN WHAT?', KIER ZOH WAS CALM, BUT HIS TONE SHOULDN'T FOOL ANYONE. 'DIDN'T I WAIT ALL THESE YEARS TO GET WHAT I WANT?'

- 'MARAK TULBA BEQUEATHED SOMETHING ELSE TO OUR RACE. THAT IS WHY SHE BROUGHT DOWN GIMLIN ORN. THAT'S WHY SHE CHOSE MIDRIEL. SHE CHOSE GOOD,' SHE WHISPERED, SOMEWHAT SOFTLY.

- 'YOU KNOW NOTHING,' THE PRINCE LAUGHED AT HER. 'I HAVE BEEN UNDERESTIMATED AND UNNOTICED ALL MY LIFE. NOW AT LEAST TRADITION IS ON MY SIDE. I HAVE A RIGHT TO REVENGE MYSELF FOR ALL THESE YEARS OF DISAPPOINTMENT.'

- 'TRADITION IS NOT ON ANYONE'S SIDE,' RAS TIAN REPLIED SHARPLY. 'OUR ANCESTORS CREATED IT FOR THEIR TIME. BUT IT'S DIFFERENT NOW...'

- KIER ZOH HAD TURNED ALMOST WHITE WITH SPITE, 'WHO CAN SAY THAT TO MY FACE? LET HIM HAVE THAT AUDACITY? I'LL SLAUGHTER HIM LIKE A DOG!'

TRANSFORMED, COVERED IN ELURIAN SKIN FROM HEAD TO TOE, RAS TIAN APPROACHED THE CLERIC. SHE HAD BECOME SIMPLY UNRECOGNIZABLE. HER TALL STATURE WAS ACCENTUATED BY THE BENZOIN NARAMENTS TYPICAL OF THE GUARDSMEN OF THE KING'S ARMY. SHE STEPPED SLOWLY, OBLIVIOUS TO HER OPPONENT'S ANGER. HE SEEMED TO FLINCH.

- 'YOU WERE THE ONE SAVED AT THAT RIANTIAN WELL. YOUR FATE WOULD HAVE BEEN DIFFERENT, BUT YOUR BROTHER BROKE THE CURSE,' HER VOICE BOOMED MENACINGLY.

STRANGE AS IT SEEMED TO HER, KIER ZOH WAS LEFT WITH HER MOUTH HANGING OPEN, BUT STILL WITH HER EYES SQUINTED, FULL OF HATRED. HE KEPT HIS EYES ON HER, EVEN WONDERING IF HIS FELLOW SCOUT HAD ALREADY BEEN KILLED BY ONE OF HIS BROTHER'S TRUSTED MEN.

- 'WHAT DO YOU KNOW ABOUT THIS WHOLE STORY?,' HE ALMOST HISSED. 'EVEN THE DEAD GROANDUS IN THE SACRED FIELDS OF AU KAKTIR WERE NOT BORN AT THAT TIME - AND YOU ARE SO YOUNG.'

- 'YOU'RE WRONG AGAIN,' SHE TURNED TO HIM WITH A PURE SMILE.

THE PRINCE WAS NOW QUITE CONFUSED. DISBELIEF WAS WRITTEN ALL OVER HIS FACE. BUT SOMEWHERE THERE WAS BEGINNING TO BE READ SOME VAGUE NOTE OF READINESS TO ACCEPT WHAT WAS SAID AS AT LEAST POSSIBLE. NOT AS TRUTH, OF COURSE! THIS WAS SHEER MADNESS! HE, A PURE-BLOODED WARRIOR OF ZARAG TU'S CAMP, A PRINCE OF THE GUARRONS, SAVED IN THIS WAY. BUT STILL, SOME GLIMMER ILLUMINATED HIS MEMORY.

- 'WHO ARE YOU?,' HE ASKED HER IN A VOICE QUITE INHUMAN.

- 'I AM MARAK TULBA,' REPLIED THE MAIDEN WITH ICY CALM.

THE PRETENDER TO BE KING SCREAMED AND FELL ON HIS EYES. HIS FOREHEAD HIT THE HARD SAND. NO GUARRON - GOOD OR BAD, PUREBLOOD LORD OR COMMON SOLDIER - HAD THE RIGHT TO DISBELIEVE HER.

- 'THAT'S NOT POSSIBLE,' THE PRINCE ORDERED THE WORDS, SUBDUED AS IF BY A HIGHER POWER. 'YOU ARE PURELY AND SIMPLY THE DAUGHTER OF TUR 'AI SAN. CHIEF OF MY FATHER'S GUARD. IT IS NOT POSSIBLE FOR YOU TO DECEIVE ME.' HE WAS ALREADY ON THE POINT OF LASHING OUT.'

- 'STOP, MERE MORTAL, AND THINK. WHAT HAPPENED THEN?', HER VOICE BOOMED AGAIN.

KIER ZOH SEEMED TO SINK DEEP INTO HIS OWN SUBCONSCIOUS AS IF SPELLBOUND, AND THEN HE SAW A SMALL BABY FOOT PROTRUDE FROM THAT SAME WELL. SOME HAND WAS INEXORABLY CLASPING IT, BUT WHAT IT WAS HE COULD NOT SEE, MUCH LESS UNDERSTAND. IT ALL UNFOLDED VERY QUICKLY, AND HE WAS ONCE AGAIN THROWN OUT OF ALL THAT NOTHINGNESS HE HAD BEEN IMMERSSED IN ONLY MOMENTS BEFORE.

HE LOOKED AROUND. IT WAS BEGINNING TO GET DARK. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THE GODDESS'S SPIRIT. OF RAS TIAN TOO.

^^^

THE PRINCE PONDERED. THE SACRED FIELDS OF AU KAKTIR WERE LEGENDARY AND WERE LOCATED BEHIND THE MISTY MOUNTAINS. IN THIS DISTANT PLACE WAS THE CRADLE WHERE HE HIMSELF HAD BEEN BORN. WHY WAS THIS HAPPENING TO HIM RIGHT NOW? POWER COULD HAVE ESCAPED HIM. ALL TOO EASILY AT THAT. YES, OF COURSE, HE WAS NOT ALONE. THERE WERE OTHER ALLIES BESIDES ZONTRAG WHO HAD HIS BACK, BUT MOST WANTED HIS BROTHER AS THEIR LEADER. THAT WAS KNOWN BY ALL. SOMEHOW HE MORE CLEARLY EXPRESSED THE LINE OF SUCCESSION. TRADITION, HOWEVER, WAS ABOVE THEIR PREFERENCES. NO ONE WOULD STEP ON IT. HE REMEMBERED ONE OF HIS FAVORITE CHILDREN'S SONGS.

NA RAS TU RI OZO

WE SING AND LAUGH.

ANO SIRO DAS TUL



WE DEFEAT OUR ENEMIES.

Ji Li Ho No Do.

TRAITORS DIE.

THE LITTLE GUARRON BABIES WERE LULLED TO SLEEP WITH HER BY THEIR BRAVE WARRIOR MOTHERS. EACH OF THEM WOULD BE PROUD IF HER CHILD BECAME A NAS RADAL, OR IN OTHER WORDS, PART OF THE RULER'S ELITE GUARD.

ONE THING, HOWEVER, INEVITABLY CROSSED HIS MIND, AND THAT WAS THAT, IN ADDITION TO BEING CRUEL, THE GUARRONS WERE SELFISH. PERHAPS THAT WAS WHAT WAS RUINING THEM. HE ALSO REALIZED WHAT A BIG EGOIST HE WAS, WANTING ALL THIS POWER FOR HIMSELF TO HIDE THE FACT THAT HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO DO ANYTHING, OR MORE ACCURATELY, THAT HE DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO REALIZE HIS FULL POTENTIAL. THE LIFE OF A PRINCE WAS NOT AS EASY AS IT FIRST SEEMED. IT WAS REALLY HARD TO FIND A PLACE UNDER THE SUN. THIS REALLY PISSED HIM OFF AND HE STUCK THE BLADE OF THE LASER CUTTER INTO A NEARBY ROCK. THERE WAS A DEAFENING CLATTER, NOT BECAUSE THE BLOW WAS TOO LOUD, BUT BECAUSE THE BLADE NEARLY BROKE ON CONTACT WITH THE HARD CHUNK OF GRANITE.

NOW HE WAS ALONE, COMPLETELY ALONE, DAMN ALONE AND FREE TO MAKE A DECISION. A DECISION ON WHICH HIS FURTHER FATE DEPENDED.

'PERHAPS IT IS MY DESTINY TO RETURN TO AU KAKTIR AGAIN,' RAN THROUGH HIS MIND. - 'PERHAPS THEREIN LIES THE ANSWER. BUT FIRST I MUST END THIS DUEL. FOR BETTER OR WORSE. OTHERWISE I'LL LOOK LIKE A COWARD AND A FOOL.'

'REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED THEN.,' THE VOICE OF THE GODDESS RAN THROUGH HIS MIND.

'SURELY THERE IS A WAY FOR BOTH THE WOLF TO BE FULL AND THE LAMB TO BE WHOLE,' HE CONTINUED HIS REASONING.

AT THAT MOMENT A NOISE CAME FROM BEHIND HIM. IT WAS ZONTRAG. IT WAS OBVIOUS THAT HE HAD DEFINITELY BEEN IN A HURRY AND WAS SWEATING. FROM UNDER HIS BUSHY EYEBROWS HIS EYES DARTED RESTLESSLY.

- 'THERE'S A BIG DISCREPANCY BETWEEN YOUR EXPECTATIONS AND WHAT THEY'RE UP TO. WHATEVER YOU DO, YOU WON'T BE THE NEXT KING,' HE SNARLED. 'THE CEREMONY WAS TO TAKE PLACE WITH OR WITHOUT A DUEL. BUT THE COMMONER'S EYES WERE TO BE BLINDFOLDED. THAT WAS CONVENIENT. YOUR FATHER REGRETTED IT, BUT NUNDRAG HAD BEEN CHOSEN.'

HERE KIER ZOH TURNED, AND HE WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED.

- 'REALLY?,' HE ASKED WITH A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF SLYNESS IN HIS VOICE.

- SEE THE DUEL COULD NOT BE AVOIDED. THAT MUCH IS CLEAR. BUT HE WON THE SYMPATHY OF THE NAS RADAL FIGHTERS WITH HIS LAST VICTORY. THAT IS A VERY STRONG TRUMP CARD IN HIS HANDS. EVERYONE SEES IN HIM THE WARLORD.

- 'BUT HE STILL HAS TO KILL ME, DOESN'T HE?,' THE PRETENDER TO THE THRONE GROWLED.

- 'RAS TIAN SAW ME. SHE'S ON MY TRAIL,' ZONTRAGG SNAPPED, CHANGING THE SUBJECT OF THE CONVERSATION. 'I PRETENDED NOT TO NOTICE HER. I SNEAKED AWAY AND HID.'

- 'SHE WAS HERE A MOMENT AGO,' KIER ZOH NAILED HIM FOR A MOMENT. 'SHE BEAT YOU TO IT.'

THE SPY SIMPLY FELL SILENT.

- A WHOLE THEATRE PLAYED OUT. SAID SHE WAS THE MOTHER GODDESS MARAK TULBA. AND I FELL ON MY EYES TO SHOW HER I BELIEVED HER. WE HAVE TO BUY TIME, HOWEVER LITTLE IT IS.

THOUGH HE WAS SKILLED IN HIS CRAFT, ZONTRAG REMAINED GAPING-MOUTHED FOR A SPLIT SECOND. THEN HE ADDED WITH DIGNITY.

- ACTUALLY, THAT WAS PART OF MY PLAN. THE LITTLE BRAT COULDN'T DIE IF WE DIDN'T MAKE HER FEEL IMPORTANT. BUT SHE COULD DEFINITELY BE AN ASSET TO US.

- 'AU KAKTIR?,' THE PRINCE RECITED.

- 'EXACTLY,' THE SPY WHISPERED, INDICATING THAT HE HAD BEEN BEHIND THE ROCK AND HAD OVERHEARD SOME OF THEIR CONVERSATION. 'WE'RE NOT ALLOWED TO MAKE MISTAKES THIS TIME. WE MUST SOMEHOW MAKE THEM FOLLOW US. THE GROANDUS HAVE AN EXCELLENT SENSE OF SMELL. IT WON'T BE A PROBLEM FOR THEM TO FIND US.'

- 'SHALL WE PROCEED AS PLANNED?,' ASKED HIS CO-CONSPIRATOR, JUST IN CASE. 'THE ONLY WAY TO TRULY DEFEAT HIM IS TO MAKE HIM LOSE HIS LEGITIMACY AS RULER. AND THAT CAN ONLY HAPPEN ON YOUR TURF. NOT ON HIS.'

- 'EXACTLY,' WAS THE PRINCE'S RESPONSE.

BEHIND THEM, THE DESERT WHISPERED MAGICAL WORDS AND HUGE SAND CLOUDS CRASHED AGAINST THE ROCK THEY HAD HIDDEN BEHIND. IT WAS BEGINNING TO GROW DUSK. THE SYRENATH WINDS WERE GOING TO PICK UP AND MAKE THE AIR EVEN HARDER TO BREATHE. ONCE RAS TIAN HAD FOUND THEM, HIS BROTHER WOULD SURELY SOON FINISH AS WELL AND THE DUEL COULD BEGIN. BUT RIGHT THEN, HE WOULD FALL INTO THE TRAP!

THEY HAD TO GET TO AU KAKTIR AT ALL COSTS. THEIR PLAN WAS TO RIDE RELENTLESSLY THERE, TO AVENGE THEIR OWN RACE FOR ITS CHOICE TO ACCEPT NUNDRAG. THE CLIMATE OF THE MOUNTAINS

WAS HARSH, AND EVEN LARGE ANIMALS LIKE THE GROANDUS WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME CLIMBING SOME OF THE RIDGES. MOREOVER, THEY WERE NOT STOCKED WITH FOOD AND WATER. THEY WERE GOING TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH TRAITORS, AS THE CHILDREN'S SONG WENT. OR SO THEY HOPED.

AFTER MORE THAN TWO DAYS THEY WERE AT THE FOOT OF THE MOUNTAINS. THE MAJESTIC COGS WERE SHROUDED IN MIST, AND CRUSHED ELATERAN CLAY ENCASED SOME UPWARD-CURVING AND POINTED, BOAR'S-TOOTH-LIKE, SHALLOW ROCK FORMATIONS CALLED EOLIERANTS AND RESEMBLING SOMETHING BETWEEN A STALAGMITE AND A PONOR. A FINE RAIN WAS BEGINNING TO FALL, AND THE RUSTLING WATER WAS LOST UNKNOWN WHERE IN THESE FORMATIONS. THE HARSHNESS OF THE SURROUNDINGS MADE THE BLOOD IN THE VEINS FREEZE. KIER ZOH HAD NEVER SEEN SUCH A PLACE. THE UPWARD SLOPES WERE MORE THAN STEEP WITH SHARP CUTS FROM WATER THAT HAD FLOWED FOR MILLENNIA.

- 'IT IS SAID THAT THERE ARE ARCHANEANS STILL LURKING UP THERE,' ZONTRAG INTERRUPTED HIS MUSINGS. 'REPRESENTATIVES OF THEIR ELDERS FROM THE SO-CALLED VOLTARIAN CIRCLE. WE MAY RUN INTO THEM.'

- 'WE HAVE WEAPONS, DON'T WORRY,' KIER ZOH REPLIED CALMLY BUT FIRMLY. 'WE'LL DEAL WITH THEM SOMEHOW IF THEY GET TOO AGGRESSIVE.'

IT WAS ONLY RIGHT TO POINT OUT HERE THAT BESIDES BEING THE KING'S SPY, ZONTRAG WAS ALSO THE PRINCE'S GODFATHER, WHICH WAS WHY THE BOND BETWEEN THEM WAS SO STRONG. SHE WOULD NOT ABANDON HIM IN THE BATTLE FOR THE CROWN.

THEY HAD A TOUGH CLIMB AHEAD OF THEM. AND AN EVEN HARDER DESCENT INTO THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS OF UGROK SIN - AU KAKTIR.

'THE HARD PART, MY DEAR PRINCE, IS YET TO COME,' ZONTRAG CALLED, 'BUT WE NEED NOT SEEK THE SUPPORT OF THE WISE

ARCHANAYANS. THOUGH FEW IN NUMBER, THEY WOULD BE A STRONG SUPPORT IN A POSSIBLE CLASH WITH YOUR BROTHER'S FORCES.

THEY BEGAN TO SLOWLY CLIMB THE FOOTHILLS OF THE MOUNTAIN, THE GROANDUS BEING DROWNED IN FOAM AS THEY CROSSED THE DESERT. THEY DEFINITELY NEEDED TO FIND A PLACE TO STAY FOR THE NIGHT AND CHOOSE A PLACE SAFE FROM AMBUSHES.

THE VOLTARIAN CIRCLE, AS FAR AS I KNOW, IS A COLLECTION OF THE DOZEN OR SO SURVIVING ARCHANIANS AT ECLEC ZONE. THEY ARE THAT ANCIENT. ALMOST AS OLD AS THIS PLANET. BUT THEIR AGE DOESN'T SHOW IN THE SLIGHTEST. SO WE MUST BE CAREFUL NOT TO ANGER THEM.

- 'ARE YOU SURE WE'LL BE ABLE TO ARGUE?', ASKED KIER ZOH.

- I THINK THEY WANT THE SAME THING YOU WANT, AND MUCH MORE. THEIR RACE IS QUITE NEAR EXTINCTION, AND THEY MUST SAVE THEMSELVES SINGLY. MANY OF THEM HAVE BEEN CAPTURED IN THE CAPITAL OF ELOHY, IMGRADON. THEY WERE KIDNAPPED DURING THE LAST WAR FOR AU KAKTIR. AND THEY HAVE BEEN SLAVES EVER SINCE.

- 'I HAVE NOT HEARD OF IT,' KIER ZOH ADMITTED QUITE FRANKLY.

- 'THERE'S NO WAY YOU HAVE,' ZONTRAG SPOKE SOFTLY. 'EVEN AMONG THE GUARRON IT IS NOT SPOKEN OF, FOR GREAT SHAME AND PAIN AND CURSE HAVE BEEN UPON US SINCE THAT TIME.'

- 'WHAT HAS HAPPENED?', ASKED THE PRINCE WITH INTEREST AS THEY RODE.

- THIS STORY HAS BECOME A BYWORD FOR DISGRACE - BEFORE THE LAST WAR FOR AU KAKTIR, THE ARCHANEANS WERE A FLOURISHING NATION, BUT NOW THEY HAVE LONG LOST THEIR POWER AND HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE. ON THIS DAY VOLTARIAN, THE WISEST OF THE ARCHANEANS, HAS UTTERED A GREAT OATH OF ETERNAL PEACE AND THE OBLIGATORY DEFENCE OF THEIR NESTS HIGH IN THE MOUNTAINS.

BUT, AS IS OFTEN THE CASE, NOTHING HAPPENS BY CHANCE. GOVERNOR ELMBAUM HAS CAPTURED A DOZEN OF THEM.

- 'WAIT,' THE PRINCE INTERRUPTED HIM. 'IT'S THE HUMAN CHIEF, ISN'T IT?'

- 'EXACTLY,' ZONTRAG ENCOURAGED HIM. 'BUT HE'S NOT HUMAN AT ALL. HE ACTUALLY CARRIES OUR BLOOD AS WELL.'

- 'HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE?,' THE PRETENDER TO THE THRONE GASPED.

- 'HE HAS MIXED THE BLOOD OF OUR SLAIN WARRIORS AND THEIR ENGINEERS HAVE CREATED WHAT I THINK THEY CALL A LIFE-EXTENDING SERUM.' CONTINUED ZONTRAG. 'HE WILL LIVE MUCH LONGER THAN A NORMAL HUMAN LIFE. BUT THERE IS A CURSE. HIS SKIN IS CONSTANTLY PEELING AND HE CAN'T LAST LONG IN THE SUN BECAUSE THERE'S A CONFLICT BETWEEN OUR GENES AND HIS. I BET THE BLOOD OF THE SLAIN WHISPERS TO HIM, 'SNEAK, COME DOWN TO US. THEN DOWN IN THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS.'

- 'AND THE ARCHANEANS THEMSELVES, WHY HIM?,' ASKED KIER ZOH.

- HE IS, IN FACT, WHY HE ENSLAVED THE ARCHANAEAN CHIEFTAINS, WHOSE HEALING KNOWLEDGE ALLEVIATED HIS SUFFERING, SINCE HIS OWN SCHOLARS COULD NOT DEAL WITH SUCH AN ELEMENTAL PROBLEM. HIS REASONING IS TOO ONE-SIDED. IN HUMAN TERMS. BUT YOU, KIER ZOH, HEIR TO THE THRONE OF UGROK SIN, HAVE A CHANCE TO CLEAR YOUR NAME OF THE ANCESTRAL CURSE TO INHERIT THE THRONE THROUGH BLOOD IF YOU FIND THE CURE FOR ELMBAUM.

- 'IS THAT REALLY WHY WE SET OUT?,' THIS TIME THE PRINCE WAS NOT SURPRISED IN THE LEAST.

- 'AND NOT ONLY THAT,' ZONTRAG REPLIED AMIABLY, 'THE ARCHANEANS KNOW ALL THE SECRETS OF THIS WAR. THEY KNOW ABOUT ITS MIXED ORIGINS TOO. HE CAN UNRAVEL THE KNOT OF THE

CONFLICT. HE ALONE KNOWS SOME SECRETS THAT EVEN THEY DO NOT.'

- YOU MEAN HE IS THE SOURCE OF ALL THIS WAR ON THIS PLANET?

- 'YOU SAID IT,' WAS THE ANSWER ACROSS THE ROOM.

- 'IS AU KAKTIR OUR FINAL DESTINATION?,' THE PRINCE CONTINUED.

- 'NO,' ECHOED IN HIS EARS.

- HE WILL BE OUR FINAL DESTINATION. BUT NOT BEFORE WE FIND SEVA'S ARMOUR.

- 'THE LAST GREAT QUEEN OF AU KAKTIR,' THE PRINCE WHISPERED.

- 'WE NEED THIS ANCIENT ARTIFACT TO CATCH HIM IN THE ACT. THAT WAY, BOTH HUMANS AND ARCHANEANS, NOT LEAST OUR OWN RACE, MIGHT LIVE IN PEACE. IT WILL EXPOSE ITS TRUE NATURE. GENE PAIRS AFTER MUTATION ARE NOT PARTICULARLY STABLE. ACCORDING TO THE LEGENDS, THE ARMOR CONTAINS A SPECIAL OINTMENT DESIGNED FOR EACH HEIR TO THE THRONE. IT INTERACTS WITH OUR BODIES. SINCE ITS NOT PUREBLOOD, THERE WILL BE A CHEMICAL BACKLASH.

KIER ZOH, THE BLOODTHIRSTY WARRIOR, GAPPED. HE WAS BEGINNING TO BELIEVE THE RAMBLINGS OF TUR 'AI SAN'S DAUGHTER A LOT MORE. EVERYTHING WAS FALLING INTO PLACE. THE WELL WAS PERHAPS A METAPHOR EXPRESSING THE HIDDEN MEANING OF SOMETHING MUCH DEEPER? BUT WHAT WAS AT THE BOTTOM OF IT? HIS MIND WANDERED, BUT HE COULD NOT FIND THE ANSWER. AND HE COULD SENSE HOW VITAL IT WAS. MUCH MORE IMPORTANT EVEN THAN HIS DUEL FOR THE THRONE!

- 'YOU KNOW, WAS SHE TALKING ABOUT SOME WELL OR SOMETHING? THEN IT APPEARS THAT MY BROTHER IS THE REAL TRAITOR?,' HE ALMOST ROARED.

- 'I EXPECTED YOU TO THINK OF THAT, YOUR HIGHNESS, LONG BEFORE,' SAID THE SPY. 'THAT IS WHY YOUR BROTHER WAS

PREFERRED, BECAUSE HIS CONQUESTS WILL HIDE THE TRUTH OF THE ORIGIN OF OUR RACE, AS YOUR OWN FATHER HOPES!

- 'AND HOW DID HE GET ALL THIS INFORMATION?,' THE PRINCE SUDDENLY REALIZED, WONDERING HOW A SINGLE INDIVIDUAL COULD BE THE ROOT CAUSE OF EVERYTHING.

THE SPY WAS SILENT. BUT HIS LOGIC WAS UNAMBIGUOUS. AND IT DID NOT BODE WELL. NOR ANY POSSIBLE FUTURE SALVATION OR WAY OUT OF THE CONFLICT.

- 'WAS THIS THE LEGEND OF GIMLIN ORN AND MIDRIEL?,' THE PRINCE FINALLY ASKED. 'WE ARE JUST SOME APPENDAGE OF THE HUMAN RACE. IN FACT, WE ARE ALL NO RACE AT ALL, BUT ARE MERELY THE PRODUCT OF AN EXPERIMENT BY HUMANS?'

- 'RATHER OF A WELL THOUGHT OUT AND PLANNED ACCIDENT. AS MUCH AS YOU DON'T WANT TO BELIEVE IT HUMANS ARE NOT ENTIRELY TO BLAME,' HIS FAITHFUL COMPANION ADDED BLUNTLY. 'YOUR FATHER ACTUALLY CAME TO POWER, REINFORCING THIS LEGEND AND MAKING US BELIEVE IN IT, DESPITE THE DOUBTS MANY HAD. THERE WERE SOME WHO STILL REMEMBERED. THOUGH THEY PREFERRED TO FORGET.'

KIER ZOH FELT HE WAS ABOUT TO LEARN THE MOST HARROWING AND TERRIFYING PART OF THE STORY, AND NOT FROM THE MOUTH OF HIS FELLOW SCOUT. HE HAD TO WAIT PATIENTLY FOR THE ENCOUNTER WITH THE ARCHANAYANS. IF THEY MADE IT TO THE TOP OF THE MOUNTAIN AT ALL.

SUDDENLY A FEATHER, SHARP AS A STEEL RAZOR, STUCK IN FRONT OF THE PAWS OF THE LARGE GROANDUS THE PRINCE WAS RIDING. BUT HE DID NOT EVEN FLINCH. IN THE DUSKY MORNING A MISTY SILHOUETTE FLOATED IN THE SKY ABOVE THEM. CIRCLING, IT BLOTTED OUT THE SUN. IT WAS MAJESTIC, LIKE THE HUGE BLACK SHADOW OF A BIRD SPREADING ITS HUGE WINGS. THERE WAS NO DOUBT THAT THE NESTS OF THE ARCHANAYANS WERE NEARBY!



^^^

- 'HOW DARE YOU DISTURB THE PEACE OF THE PUREBLOOD DESCENDANTS OF VOLTARIAN?,' A MENACING VOICE BOOMED IN THE HEIGHTS. 'HOW DARE YOU COME THIS FAR, WHERE NO HUMAN FOOT IS ALLOWED?'

KIER ZOH TRIED TO MAKE A VISOR OVER HIS EYES, USING HIS HANDFUL, BUT HE STILL COULDN'T MAKE OUT THE FEATURES OF THIS HUGE CREATURE.

- 'YOU'VE GONE TOO FAR, TURN BACK OR YOU WILL PERISH!,' THE VOICE BOOMED AGAIN.

- 'WE'RE COMING TO VOLTARIAN HIMSELF,' ZONTRAG SHOUTED, 'TO TELL US SOME THINGS ABOUT THE WAR FOR AU KAKTIR.'

- 'VOLTARIAN IS LONG DEAD. YOU TWO HAVE NO BUSINESS HERE,' THE VOICE MUTTERED, NOT QUITE CONFIDENTLY BUT RATHER GRUFFLY, APPARENTLY IMPLYING THAT THE GROANDUS POSED A THREAT TO THEIR YOUNG.

- 'I'M SURE IT ISN'T. YOUR RACE IS ALMOST IMMORTAL,' ZONTRAG DIDN'T GIVE IN, 'THERE ARE A NUMBER OF CHANGES YOU'LL NEED TO GET USED TO BEFORE WE GET TO YOU.'

- 'THESE THINGS HAVE NO PLACE UP HERE, NEAR THE NESTS,' THE VOICE SHRIEKED IMPLACABLY, THEN FLEW AWAY INSTANTLY.

- 'RELAX, HE'LL BE BACK,' ZONTRAG REPLIED CALMLY. 'HE'S JUST GOING TO LET THE OTHERS KNOW. I THINK WE'LL MAKE IT, EVEN IF WE HAVE TO DUMP THE GROANDUS HERE ALREADY. IF THEY COME BACK, ALL THE BETTER, OUR PEOPLE WILL THINK WE'RE DEAD OR LOST. A GUARRON NEVER LEAVES HIS GROANDUS WHILE HE IS ALIVE. THAT WAY WE'LL BUY SOME EXTRA TIME BEFORE TUR 'AI SAN'S DAUGHTER BRINGS THEM TOO CLOSE.'

THE MOUNTAIN WAS SHROUDED IN A MIST THAT WAS ALMOST IMPENETRABLE. SO THICK THAT THE GROANDS WERE PULLING BACK

AND BITING THE AIR. THEY HAD TO GET RID OF THEM AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE OR THEY COULD SERIOUSLY HURT THE RAMPAGING ANIMALS AS THE MONSTROUS CREATURES THREATENED TO THROW THEIR RIDERS OFF. WHATEVER ZONTRAG WAS SAYING, THE PRINCE WAS EVEN MORE ON GUARD THAN BEFORE. EVERYTHING WAS GOING ACCORDING TO PLAN. FOR NOW.

THEY WAITED A WHILE, BUT NO ONE RETURNED. THEN, SUDDENLY, THERE WAS A FLUTTER OF WINGS. A WHOLE FLOCK OF ARCHANEANS SWOOPED DOWN ON OUR HAPLESS ADVENTURERS, STRIKING THEM WITH THEIR WINGS. KIER ZOH THOUGHT ABOUT PULLING OUT HIS LASER CUTTER AND STABBING THE NEAREST OF THE CREATURES, BUT SUDDENLY GAVE UP. HE JUDGED THAT THE ODDS WERE NOT ON THEIR SIDE, MOSTLY BECAUSE THEY WERE ABOUT A DOZEN OF THEM, AND ONLY IF THEY HAD ASKED COULD HE HAVE INSTANTLY DRIVEN HIS HARD-AS-STEEL FEATHERS INTO THEIR FLESH. AFTER TAKING A SOLID AMOUNT OF BEATING FROM THEIR HOSTS, A VOICE THAT SOUNDED LIKE A HOARSE WHEEZE SAID:

- STOP! THEY CAN BE TRUSTED! LET THEM PASS ON!

THEY SAW NO SILHOUETTE OR FACE. THEN SUDDENLY THE GROUP OF MAN-LIKE BIRDS FLEW AWAY AND HID IN THE THICK FOG.

THERE WERE SCARS AND BRUISES ON BOTH OF THEIR FACES. THE PRINCE'S REGAL BEARING NO LONGER LOOKED SO DIGNIFIED. HE WOULD EVEN WAGER THAT HE HAD SOME OTHER BROKEN RIB AS WELL. HE TOOK A DEEP BREATH AND THE SHARP PAIN THAT PASSED THROUGH HIS CHEST JUST SHOWED THAT THESE WERE JUST BRUISES. STILL, THEY BOTH NEEDED A FEW SECONDS TO COMPOSE THEMSELVES. THEY WERE IN NO POSITION TO RESIST, FOR KIER ZOH WANTED TO WIN THE ARCHANAYANS AS ALLIES AND RECLAIM HIS CROWN.

- 'NOW WE CAN GO HIGHER UP,' ZONTRAG SUGGESTED.

THE MISTY MOUNTAINS DID NOT BEAR THAT NAME FOR NOTHING. THE PASSAGE UPWARDS WAS BECOMING MORE AND MORE

DIFFICULT. THEY COULD NOT SEE MORE THAN TWO FEET IN FRONT OF THEIR NOSES. THEIR FEET PICKED OFF OCCASIONAL ROCKS AS THEY SEARCHED FOR MORE STABLE FOOTING AS THEY CLIMBED. SWEAT POURED FROM HER BROW, BUT STILL, THEY RELENTLESSLY CONTINUED.

THE ANCIENT SLOPES OF THE MISTY MOUNTAINS HOUSED THIS RACE, OF WHICH SO LITTLE WAS KNOWN, BUT WHICH WAS RENOWNED FOR ITS HEALING POWERS. THEY WERE ONCE THE DOMINANT RACE ON THE PLANET. THIS WAS LONG BEFORE THE GUARRON HAD EVEN APPEARED. THIS WAS KNOWN EVEN TO KIER ZOH.

THEY WERE ENTERING UNKNOWN TERRITORY. THE SIPEI BELOW WERE MONSTROUS. YOU COULD HAVE BEEN DIZZY. HE AND ZONTRAG STRAINED THE LAST OF THEIR STRENGTH, BUT THIS CLIMB SEEMED ENDLESS.

SOMEHOW, THOUGH, KIER ZOH FELT INWARDLY THAT SOMETHING MIGHT BE WRONG. HE KNEW HE WAS ON THE RIGHT TRACK, BUT HE FEARED CHANGE. HE ANTICIPATED IT WITH SUSPENSE. WITH EACH SUCCESSIVE CLIFF THEY JUMPED OVER, OR LOOSE BOULDER THAT CAME THEIR WAY, HE FELT THAT PERHAPS HIS SEEMING DESIRE TO CLAIM THE THRONE WAS MERELY A PRETEXT TO KNOW AND ACHIEVE SOMETHING FAR GREATER, BEYOND HIS OWN UNDERSTANDING. BUT WHAT? ZONTRAG BREATHLESSLY FOLLOWED HIS MASTER. THEIR HUGE GREEN PAWS WERE WOUNDED TO BLOOD. IT WASN'T SO EASY TO REACH THE TOP, BUT THEY PERSISTED.

SUDDENLY, A CRACK SEEMED TO BE HEARD. THE PRINCE TURNED AROUND. THE OLD SPY HAD SLIPPED, AND MIRACULOUSLY HAD CAUGHT HOLD OF A TWIG THAT WOULD GIVE WAY UNDER HIS WEIGHT AT ANY MOMENT. HIS TIME WAS RUNNING OUT. DESPAIR WAS WRITTEN ON HIS FACE. HE WAS SIMPLY A PASSENGER. KIER ZOH WONDERED IF IT WAS WORTH SAVING HIM, SINCE IT WOULD MEAN FOLLOWING HIM INTO THE ABYSS. ZONTRAG UNDERSTOOD HIS INTENTIONS AND SAID:

- 'LET ME DIE, PRINCE. SAVE YOURSELF,' AND FLEW INTO THE ABYSS.

SUDDENLY GREAT WINGS FLAPPED FROM SOMEWHERE AND A YOUNG AND STRONG ARCHANAEAN TOOK THE FALLING CREATURE. PAYING NO ATTENTION TO ANYTHING, HE SIMPLY SOARED INTO THE AIR. MAJESTICALLY GRAZING THE AIR WITH HIS WINGS, HE SOARED EVEN HIGHER, TOWARDS THE VERY TOP. ITS SILVERY FEATHERS WERE RAZOR SHARP. THE LIGHT REFLECTED IN THEM WAS SIMPLY BLINDING. THEN SUDDENLY IT DISAPPEARED.

THE PRINCE FOLLOWED IT WITH HIS GAZE. HE SHOULD HAVE FOLLOWED IT, BUT NOW HE REALLY WONDERED WHY THEY WERE SAVING ZONTRAG RIGHT NOW. THE BEHAVIOUR OF THESE 'THINGS', AS HE MENTALLY CALLED THEM, WAS APPARENTLY QUITE CONTRADICTORY. HE KNEW, HOWEVER, THAT HE WOULD HAVE A HARD TIME GETTING OVER THE LOSS OF HIS LOYAL ALLY, SO WITHOUT WANTING TO ADMIT IT EVEN TO HIMSELF, IN HIS HEART, HE THANKED THEM. THAT DIDN'T STOP HIM FROM HATING THEM TO DEATH AT THE SAME TIME, FOR ALL THE BEATING HE TOOK. THE CHALLENGER, WITH THE LAST OF HIS STRENGTH, TROTTED TO THE TOP. THERE WAS STILL A LITTLE WAY TO GO.

AFTER A FEW HOURS, HE WAS ALREADY STANDING ON ONE OF THE HIGHEST SLOPES - THE VERY TOP, BUT THERE WAS, STRANGELY ENOUGH, ABSOLUTELY NOTHING THERE. THERE WERE NO NESTS OF ARCHANGELS, NO FEATHERS, LET ALONE THE REMAINS OF THE CORPSES OF THE STRANGE MAN-LIKE CREEPS. HE WAS ALMOST READY TO SCREAM HERE, REALIZING HE WAS ALL ALONE, ON THIS PEAK WHERE HE WOULD SURELY DIE IF HE DIDN'T FIND SOME FOOD. HE WAS READY TO EAT EVEN A PORTION OF THE HIGH-CALORIE FOOD THEY WERE GIVING THE HUMAN PILOTS. BUT EVEN THAT WASN'T ...

A MAJESTIC PICTURE UNFOLDED BEFORE HIS EYES. HE HAD CLIMBED SO HIGH THAT HE COULD PRACTICALLY SEE THE OUTLINE OF THE ZEGARAI MOUNTAINS, OR AT LEAST PART OF THEM. THEIR RIDGES WERE IMPOSING AND DEFINITELY HIGHER THAN THOSE OF THE MISTY MOUNTAINS. HE HAD YET TO DESCEND INTO THE VALLEY, BUT THERE WAS NO TELLING WHO OR WHAT AWAITED HIM. IT WAS ALL UP TO HIM

NOW. HIS VERY MIND WAS WHISPERING TO HIM, 'YOU'VE COME TOO FAR TO DIE JUST LIKE THIS. YOU MUST FIND THE WELL! YOU MUST FIND SEVA'S ARMOR!'

THE PRINCE HEADED THAT WAY. ALONE, BUT DETERMINED TO FIND THE ANSWER TO THE RIDDLE.

^^^

THE PRINCE WAS ALREADY DESCENDING INTO THE 'VALLEY OF KINGS'. WHERE HE WAS BORN. WHERE WAS THE BONEYARD OF HIS RACE IN THE NOT SO DISTANT PAST. EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT NOW. OR PERHAPS TOO MUCH TIME HAD PASSED. AND HE COULDN'T TELL EXACTLY. HE WAS ON GUARD FOR A SUDDEN ATTACK. HE WASN'T SURE IF ANY MEMBERS OF THEIR RACE STILL LIVED ON THESE LANDS. HE COULD SEE A VAGUE TREPIDATION RISING IN HIM FOR REACHING UNSUSPECTED HEIGHTS, BUT SOMEHOW HE COULDN'T ACCEPT THAT HE WAS READY FOR IT. EVERY ONE HAS SUCH A MOMENT IN HIS LIFE. HE WAS ALONE, UTTERLY ALONE, AND HE COULD TAKE IT ALL OR DIE. IT WAS UP TO HIM. HE COULD FEEL THE ACHE IN HIS STOMACH, MAKING HIM RUSH EVEN MORE. MAYBE IT WAS BECAUSE ONE OF THE BIRDS' FEATHERS HAD HOOKED HIM QUITE BY ACCIDENT. HE BENT HIS GAZE AND REMAINED PINCHED. SOMEONE HAD PLACED A SMALL LEATHER POUCH ON HIS BELT. HE COULDN'T BELIEVE IT. HE RUMMAGED IN IT AND FOUND A STRANGE PARCHMENT WITH THE WORDS 'GO ON WITHOUT FEAR, EVEN IF YOU DIE, THIS IS YOUR PATH, DON'T STOP...' WHOEVER THE PRANKSTER WAS OBVIOUSLY UNDERSTOOD POETRY, BUT THE PRINCE SET ABOUT SEARCHING FOR A DEEPER MEANING IN THE WORDS.

HE REMEMBERED THAT HIS FATHER WAS CONCERNED BECAUSE OF THE CONFLICT WITH HIS BROTHER. HE ALSO TRIED TO THINK OF RAS TIAN'S WORDS, ABOUT HIS BROTHER. DAMN! THERE WERE SO MANY PEOPLE, SO MANY WORDS BEING SAID. HE COULDN'T CONNECT ANY OF THEM TO WHAT WAS WRITTEN.

ALL THAT SWIRLED IN HIS HEAD WERE VARIOUS IMAGES OF BLOODY BATTLES. NOTHING MEANINGFUL. MENTALLY, HE DECIDED TO PUT OFF SOLVING THE MYSTERY UNTIL LATER. THE ANSWER LAY DOWN THERE SOMEWHERE AND HE WOULD DEFINITELY FIND IT.

HE REGRETTED THAT HE WAS PLAGUED BY AN INTENSE THIRST AND COULDN'T DRINK SOME ENSARIAN WINE. EVEN THE GUARRONS LIKED TO STEAL IT AND DEFINITELY THOUGHT IT WAS THE BEST DISCOVERY HUMANS HAD MADE. HE'D PROBABLY DRINK A WHOLE MECH AND FALL ASLEEP LIKE A STUMP. BUT SOMEONE OR SOMETHING COULD HAVE CUT HIS HEAD OFF. IT WAS A MATTER OF HONOR! A ROYAL ONE AT THAT! WHO WOULD DARE SLEEP AFTER BEING SO CLOSE TO THE MARK? WHO WOULD MISS SUCH A CHANCE?

SUDDENLY, FOUR PAIRS OF STRONG HANDS GRABBED HIM FROM BEHIND AND TWISTED HIS OWN BEHIND HIS BACK. HE WAS FORCED TO BEND OVER. BUT KIER ZOH WAS A DEFT WARRIOR. USING HIS INVISIBLE FOES AS A FOOTHOLD, HE MASTERFULLY SPUN AND DROVE SUCH A KICK INTO THEIR THUGS THAT THEIR INVISIBLE TEETH WOULD SURELY HAVE SNAPPED OUT. HE FELT THEM DROP HIM. HE TURNED. THERE WAS NO ONE THERE. WAS HE GOING TO PASS OUT?

HE CONTINUED DOWN THE ANCIENT SLOPES. THE SURROUNDING AREA LOOKED GRITTY AND DRY, YET NOT COMPLETELY DEVOID OF VEGETATION. HE HAD TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT FACT. SO WHAT? SURELY THERE WAS A WAY TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT. THE GUARRON WERE DEFINITELY NOT FARMERS LIKE HUMANS, BUT EVEN THEY HAD A BASIC KNOWLEDGE IN THIS AREA. STRANGE LITTLE LIANA-LIKE BUSHES WERE SEEN HERE AND THERE. THEY DEFINITELY LOOKED LIKE VOLUNTEER WEEDS. NOTHING IMPRESSIVE. HE WALKED AND WALKED. THE SOIL BURNED HIS FEET. MAYBE HALF A DAY PASSED LIKE THAT. SUDDENLY HE REALIZED SOMETHING IMPORTANT. HE HAD TO FIND SAFE COVER, BECAUSE HE WAS SCRATCHING AGAIN. HE GLANCED FOR THE NEAREST BUSHES AND JUST CROUCHED BEHIND ONE. THE LASER CUTTER WAS IN ONE OF HIS HANDS, READY FOR ANY CONTINGENCY.

A LITTLE LATER, SLEEP OVERCAME HIM. SOMEONE WITH A HOOD ON THEIR HEAD APPEARED TO HIM IN HIS SLEEP AND WHISPERED 'YOU'RE VERY CLOSE, WHEN YOU FIND THE ANSWER YOU'LL DIE...'  
HE WOKE, DRENCHED IN SWEAT. IT WAS TERRIBLY STRANGE. HE FELT HIS NECK WITH HIS HAND. WAS HE LIVING IN A NIGHTMARE? NO - THIS WAS EVEN WORSE. HE WAS LIVING IN HIS OWN FICTIONAL, ILLUSORY WORLD, WELL-FED, WITH THE STATUS OF A PRINCE. WHAT WAS THERE EVEN TO TALK ABOUT? HE NEEDED TO WIN! EVEN JUST ONCE! NOT FOR GLORY! BUT TO FEEL LIFE FILLING HIM AGAIN!

IT OCCURRED TO HIM TO FEEL HIS BELT. THE POUCH WAS NO LONGER THERE. IT OCCURRED TO HIM THAT EVEN THOUGH NOTHING WAS CLEAR TO HIM, HE WAS BEGINNING TO GRASP THE LOGIC IN THIS WHOLE THING. IT EVEN MADE TOO MUCH SENSE TO HIM.

IN THE DISTANCE, A SETTLEMENT OF SOME SORT APPEARED. THE PRINCE WAS STILL TOO FAR AWAY TO BE SURE WHAT IT ACTUALLY WAS. STRANGE TENTS WHERE THEIR ANCESTORS HAD MOST LIKELY LIVED WERE VISIBLE HERE AND THERE. HE DECIDED NOT TO TAKE ANY CHANCES AND GO STRAIGHT INTO THE VILLAGE, BUT TO WAIT, AT LEAST FOR A LITTLE WHILE, TO LOOK AROUND. THE PAIN IN HIS STOMACH SEEMED TO INTENSIFY AGAIN. WHY THE HELL COULDN'T HE GET RID OF IT? AND WHY WAS SHE CALLING RIGHT NOW WHEN HE NEEDED ALL HIS STRENGTH.

WHEN HE FINALLY GOT THE COURAGE TO GO INSIDE, HE SAW THAT THE VILLAGE WAS ACTUALLY QUITE DESERTED AND DEAD QUIET. SHE DECIDED TO SEARCH IT ANYWAY. ANYTHING COULD BE OF USE TO HIM. HE WALKED INTO JUST ABOUT THE FIRST TENT THAT CAME INTO SIGHT.

THEN HE HEARD THE VOICE BEHIND HIM.

- SO YOU DECIDED TO COME AFTER ALL!

- I CAME TO HEAR THE TRUTH. AND NOT LEAST TO ACCEPT MY FATE, HE DECLARED RATHER CLICHÉD AND PATHETIC.

- OH, SO IT IS, EH,' YOU'LL FIND IT OUT SOON ENOUGH. EVEN TONIGHT. BUT UNTIL THEN, BE MY GUEST. EAT AND DRINK TO MY HEALTH.

- 'BUT I DON'T SEE YOU,' REPLIED THE PRINCE A LITTLE AWKWARDLY.

- 'IT IS NOT NECESSARY,' THE VOICE REPLIED SIMPLY. 'THE IMPORTANT THING IS THAT YOU ARE HERE.'

HE TURNED AND SAW A TABLE SET, LIKE IN THE FAIRY TALES. HE SAT DOWN AND BEGAN TO EAT. THERE WAS SOME OF THE CHICKEN MILK. THERE WAS SOME FRUIT THAT HE HAD EATEN AS A CHILD - LIKE ELMOANA BANANAS, AND IT WAS PLISTOREAN PASTA. GOD HOW DELICIOUS THEY WERE! CONSIDERING THE NOMADIC LIFE THEY LED, THESE TWO FOODS WERE A REAL DELICACY. SUDDENLY, SOMETHING IN THE CORNER STIRRED. HE DECIDED TO CHECK. HE SQUEEZED THE HANDLE OF THE KNIFE AND SAW A HUGE SACK MOVING LEFT AND RIGHT. HE WENT TO UNTIE IT. INSIDE HE FOUND THE BODY OF HIS FAITHFUL COMPANION ZONTRAG. HE WAS DEAD. IT LOOKED LIKE A HEART ATTACK. QUITE A NASTY ACCIDENT! BUT AT LEAST HE HAD DIED WITH A SMILE ON HIS FACE. IN HIS HANDS WAS A NOTE 'THIS IS FOR YOU, PRINCE! I'LL SEE YOU TONIGHT!'

- 'SO BE IT,' SAID THE PRINCE.

STILL, THERE WAS TOO MUCH TIME BEFORE EVENING. SO HE DECIDED TO MAKE THE MOST OF IT AND WANDER AROUND THE VILLAGE. IT WAS DEFINITELY STRANGE. A KIND OF NOSTALGIA CAME OVER HIM FOR THIS MUCH MORE SETTLED LIFE COMPARED TO HIS PRESENT ONE. EVERYTHING WAS FALLING INTO PLACE SOMEHOW. EVERYTHING WAS SO SIMPLE. THE PRINCE WAS WANDERING AIMLESSLY THROUGH THE STREETS WITHOUT ANY REAL THOUGHT WHEN HE FINALLY SAW SOMETHING RATHER INTERESTING.

SOME SMALL CEMETERY, NOT FAR FROM THE VILLAGE. IT LOOKED EVEN MORE LONELY THAN THE VILLAGE ITSELF. AFTER A FEW MINUTES, HE WAS ALREADY THERE. HE SAW A SMALL PLAQUE, ALMOST COMPLETELY ERASED, THAT SAID 'SEVA' ON IT. HE STARTED



TO DIG THE GRAVE. THE MORE HE DUG AND THE MORE DIRT HE THREW AWAY, THE MORE IT SEEMED TO HIM THAT HE WAS DOING NOTHING. HE WAS ONLY WASTING HIS STRENGTH. FINALLY A STONE SARCOPHAGUS WITH INTRICATE INITIALS ON IT CAME INTO VIEW. THE PRINCE WASN'T SURE IF HE COULD MOVE IT AT ALL. IT WAS SO HEAVY. SO HE DECIDED TO PUSH IT AWAY. THAT SEEMED POSSIBLE TO HIM.

WHEN HE DID, HE SAW THE QUEEN'S REMAINS. ON HER NECK WAS THE SAME INSCRIPTION, 'HERE WE MEET AGAIN!'

THE PRINCE CRIED ALOUD. IT WAS THE VOICE!

^^^

- 'YOU SHOULD HEAR MY VOICE MORE OFTEN, KIER ZOH,' THE SKELETON KEPT TELLING HIM, GIGGLING FURIOUSLY. - I AM THE LAST GREAT QUEEN OF AU KAKTIR. ME AND NO ONE ELSE. THAT IS WHAT I WANT YOU TO REMEMBER. YOU AND YOUR BROTHER FOUGHT OVER NOTHING! AND THE WHOLE DAMN PLANET IS AT WAR, BUT I'M CHANNELING A GROUP OF BRAVE MEN WHO WANT TO HELP. EVEN IF THEIR HELP PROVES USELESS. THEY WANT TO HELP! YOU UNDERSTAND ME!' THE SKELETON WAS JUST DISGUSTING. - AND WHAT DID YOU DO? CAN YOU TELL ME? YOU MADE THE MISTAKE OF GOING DOWN A PATH THAT WASN'T FOR YOU AT ALL. YOUR BROTHER IS BECOMING A KING, BUT NOT YOU. YOUR SITUATION IS DIFFERENT. YOU WILL HAVE AN EVEN MORE IMPORTANT ROLE. THE ROLE OF REDEEMER.

KIER ZOH WATCHED HER. THAT SKELETON MUST HAVE LOST HIS MIND. BUT HOW WAS THAT POSSIBLE SINCE THERE WASN'T A DROP OF BRAINS IN HIS ROTTEN SKULL? HOW DARE SHE SPEAK TO HIM LIKE THAT? THIS WAS INTOLERABLE! STRANGE BUSINESS! BUT THERE WERE SIGNALS REACHING HIS MIND THAT CLEARLY SHOWED SHE COULD BE TRUSTED. SHE WAS AWARE OF WHAT SHE WAS SAYING!

- 'I'LL LISTEN TO YOU,' SAID THE PRINCE. 'I AM GUILTY. AND BECAUSE I WAS WRONG, I BEG ATONEMENT FOR MY DEEDS.'

- 'ISN'T IT A LITTLE LATE?', THE SKELETON CONTINUED TO QUARREL. 'I'LL HELP YOU, BUT YOU MUSTN'T STRAY THIS TIME. YOU WILL FIND ELMBAUM. AND YOU WILL BRING HIM BACK ALIVE. ALIVE, NOT DEAD. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?'

- 'YES,' REPLIED THE PRINCE, IN A TONE AS IF HE WERE BEING WHEELED AND CUT TO PIECES. 'I WILL BRING HIM BACK. I PROMISE.'

- 'BUT YOU CAN'T FIND HIM WITHOUT MY HELP,' THE VOICE GREW SERIOUS. 'YOU'LL BE REUNITED WITH A GROUP OF BRAVE MEN WHO ARE HUMAN.'

- 'HUMANS,' ROARED KIER ZOH, RED WITH RAGE.

- 'YES, PEOPLE. OF FLESH AND BLOOD. WITH MUTUAL STRENGTH YOU WILL FIND IT.,' THE VOICE WAS ALREADY LOSING PATIENCE, BUT HE WAS TRYING TO KEEP HIS COMPOSURE.

- 'ALL RIGHT, LET'S ASSUME I AGREE! WHAT DO I GET?,' HE ASKED SOMEWHAT HAUGHTILY, SEDUCED BY THE THOUGHT OF PLAYING SUCH AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN SAVING THE PLANET.

- 'NOTHING,' WAS THE SIMPLE ANSWER.

- 'HOW COME NOTHING? NOTHING AT ALL?,' HE ALMOST SPUTTERED.

- 'YES, NOTHING. THAT'S WHAT YOU'RE ENTITLED TO,' THE VOICE REPLIED.

- 'GOOD. I ACCEPT,' HE SAID AFTER SOME INTERNAL STRUGGLE. 'I'LL DO WHAT YOU WANT.'

- 'YOU HAVE TO ASK FOR IT, TOO,' THE VOICE ADDED. 'THIS IS THE SECRET. ONLY THEN WILL IT BE REAL.'

SUDDENLY THE SKELETON CRUMBLED. ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS THE INSCRIPTION 'BEHOLD, WE HAVE MET!'

KIER ZOH WAS QUITE STARTLED. HE STOOD BY THE SHALLOW GRAVE. AND HE WONDERED IF HE WAS DREAMING. WHAT THEY

WANTED FROM HIM. HE WASN'T FIT TO BE A PRINCE, HE WASN'T FIT TO BE A KING, HE WASN'T EVEN FIT TO BE USURPER TO THE THRONE!

BUT MAYBE HE WAS GOING TO BE A SCAPEGOAT! HIS EGO WAS CALLING TO HIM! IT NAGGED AT HIM SO HARD! SOMETHING WAS GNAWING AT HIS BRAIN!

- 'AT LEAST I HAVE A CHANCE TO FIX THINGS,' HE BLURTED OUT.

BY THE TIME HE TURNED AROUND, MARK AND THE OTHERS WERE BEHIND HIM. THEY LOOKED AROUND FOR A WHILE, FATHER ALMOST PULLING OUT HIS BLASTER AND NOT SHOOTING HIM IN THE HEAD, BUT THE RAT WHO KNOWS WHY STOPPED HIM. THEY DIDN'T SPEAK THE LANGUAGE, THEY COULDN'T UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER, THEY DIDN'T KNOW HOW TO COMMUNICATE. THEY STARTED DRAWING SIGNS IN THE SAND. IT WAS NAIVE, BUT IT WORKED. COMMUNICATION PROVED SUCCESSFUL.

THE VOICE HAD OPENED A PORTAL FROM THE ZEGARAI MOUNTAINS TO DEATH VALLEY, AND THEY HAD TRAVELED THOUSANDS OF MILES IN JUST A FEW HUNDREDTHS OF A SECOND.

KIER ZOH EXPLAINED IN DETAIL WHAT WAS REQUIRED OF THEM. AND HE WAS MORE THAN SATISFIED THAT THEY UNDERSTOOD IT. THAT WAS ENOUGH FOR HIM. IF ANY OF THE SUBJECTS SAW HIM, KNEELING IN THE DUST, DRAWING STRANGE SHAPES, THEY WOULD KILL HIM ON THE SPOT. BUT IT WAS DIFFERENT NOW. NOW HE HAD A PURPOSE. HE HAD TO ACHIEVE IT. HE HAD TO SUCCEED. SOMETHING HAD TO SPUR HIM ON. IN SPITE OF EVERYTHING. THIS WAS WHAT HE NEEDED!

IF HE HAD NEEDED TO, HE WOULD HAVE EVEN OVERTURNED THE ENTIRE PLANET. NOT EVEN THE ENTIRE UNIVERSE. HIS MISTAKE HAD TO BE ATONED FOR. HIS VOICE SPOKE FROM WITHIN. HE HAD TO EARN FORGIVENESS. AND BEG IT HIMSELF! SOMETHING THAT WAS NOT AT ALL EASY!

MARK, PAUL, GRANDPA JACK, RAT AND THE OTHERS LOOKED AROUND. INSTEAD OF THE ROTTEN SKELETON, THEY SAW JUST A

HANDFUL OF DUST. IT WAS THAT SIMPLE. AND DAMN SIMPLE! THERE WASN'T ANY DOUBT!

THEY HAD TO ACT TOGETHER! AND THEY WERE GOING TO DO IT!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: DOOM

'DON'T MULTIPLY THE ENTITIES ANY MORE THAN NECESSARY.'

THE ZIRUARXS WERE ALREADY ENTERING SYNTHROS. IT TOOK THEIR LEADERS QUITE SOME TIME TO OVERCOME THE UNEVEN TERRAIN, AS WELL AS THE SEMI-DESERT CLIMATE THAT WAS ALSO GIVING THEM QUITE A FEW HEADACHES. THE MACHINES DID HAVE ONE PECULIARITY, NAMELY THE COMPOSITE MATERIAL, SILICA ARONAUT, OF WHICH THEY WERE MADE, COMBINED WITH THE ADDITIONAL REINFORCED THERMOFLON ARMOUR ON THE TURRET, DESPITE THEIR IMMENSE MANOEUVRABILITY, MADE THEM RELATIVELY HEAVY FOR THE SINKING, EVEN SINKING, ELANDON SOIL OF SINTROS. UNLIKE THE HUMILIAS - IT WAS HIGHLY UNSTABLE. LIKE, WE SAID, THE INTERRON FUEL WAS LITERALLY DRIPPING, EVEN JUST POKING A FINGER IN IT. APART FROM THAT FACT, THE MULTIPLE DRILLINGS HAD FRAGMENTED IT COMPLETELY. IT WAS ALSO WHY THE ELOHENIANS PREFERRED TO BUILD THEIR BASE IN LEARNIA AND USE THE ENTIRE TERRAIN OF SYNTHROS AS A NATURAL 'MOAT' AROUND THE APPROACHES TO THE BASE. IT WAS A SMART DECISION, BUT NOT THAT SMART, BECAUSE THERE REMAINED THE PROBLEM OF TREACHERY. A TRAITOR HAD HELPED THE GUARRON INFILTRATE THE BASE, BUT THE ADVANCING TROOPS WERE UNAWARE OF THAT FACT AT THE TIME. NOR DID THEY KNOW THAT A SHORT TIME LATER PARTS OF THEIR OWN ARMIES WERE SACRIFICED IN COMBAT FOR NOTHING AND NOTHING AT ALL. AGAIN, THIS WAS DUE TO TREACHERY, BUT FROM A MUCH HIGHER AUTHORITY. THEY WERE SIMPLY FULL OF ENTHUSIASM TO DO THE JOB THEY WERE BEING PAID TO DO! THEY

TALKED QUITE LOUDLY IN THE ZIRUARX, BUT THEY EXPECTED AT ANY MOMENT TO SPRING UP AS IF ON COMMAND AND START SHOWERING THE ENEMY WITH BULLETS WHILE THEIR COMRADES COVERED THEM.

RODRIGO AND DUOLORS WERE, COINCIDENTALLY, IN THE SAME ZIRUARX THAT HAD ARRIVED FIRST AT THE SECRET BASE BEFORE THEY WERE ASSIGNED.

- 'MAYBE BECKY WILL HAVE TO SORT HERSELF OUT,' RODRIGO TOSSED IN. 'BUT SHE'S A MAN'S GIRL AND KNOWS HOW TO GET OUT OF TROUBLE. LET'S HOPE THE CITY SURVIVES WITHOUT US.'

- 'IF WE GET OUT OF HERE, YOU'VE GOT A BEER FROM ME,' DUOLORS MUTTERED. 'WATCH MY BACK, LEST SOME PLASMA BOUNCE ME.'

- THEY WERE ARMED, IN ADDITION TO THE PLASMA RIFLES, WITH SPECIAL BONETIER RIFLES THAT GENERATED A POWERFUL KINETIC SHOCKWAVE THAT COULD TAKE THE ENEMY RIGHT OUT. THAT WAS IN CASE THEY NEEDED A PLAN B.

SERGEANT ZORIN, WHO WAS THE MOST SENIOR IN THE GROUP, HAD GIVEN THE BOYS QUICK, CONCISE AND PRECISE INSTRUCTIONS ON WHAT TO DO IF THE PLATOON MEMBERS GOT SEPARATED AND HOW TO COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER.

THEY WERE TO USE A PARTICULAR FORM OF DISLOCATION BEFORE THEY BEGAN TO TAKE OVER ENEMY POSITIONS. BEHIND THEM WAS A SMALL SQUAD OF ARMORED NIRANGAIS THAT THE PLATOON LEADERS WOULD USE TO OBSERVE AND AVOID FLANKING THE ENTIRE DIVISION. THE BATTLE CORPS SPLIT IN TWO.

AS MANY AS EIGHTY SPEEDERS CIRCLED ABOVE THEM AND SCOUTED THE AREA. THEY HAD SPECIAL INFRARED SENSORS DETECTING ALL BIOMETRICS OF MOVING SUBJECTS WITHIN A THIRTY-FIVE MICROSCINTIMETER RADIUS.

- 'DO NOT MULTIPLY THE ENTITIES MORE THAN NECESSARY OR IN TRANSLATION MASTER THE POSITION WITH AS FEW FORCES AS POSSIBLE.' REPEATED SERGEANT ZORIN BEFORE THE BRIGHTENING

HATCH OPENED AND THE BOYS WENT THE HELL OUT. 'DON'T WASTE ANY EXTRA AMMO. YOU HAVE ABOUT FORTY MINUTES TO BREAK THROUGH THE ENEMY FROM THE SOUTHERN APPROACH. IF THEY START TO CHASE YOU, RETREAT IN AN ORDERLY FASHION, THEY'RE NOT SUCH BIG FOOLS TO CHASE YOU INTO THE INTEROFFENSIVE FUEL FIELDS. END. IF THEY DO, WE'LL MEET THEM WITH EZONIUM BOMBS AND MACHINE GUN FIRE FROM THE NORTHEAST SIDE. I'VE DEPLOYED A FEW ZIRUARX TO PROVIDE COVER FOR YOUR WITHDRAWAL. END!'

RODRIGO, DUOLORS, AND THE OTHERS DIDN'T WAIT LONG TO PLEAD WITH THEM. THEY JUMPED LIKE SPRINGS AND POURED OUT LIKE ONE OF THE ZIRUARX'S DRONES. A MOMENT LATER, HOWEVER, THEY GAPED IN ASTONISHMENT.

- 'THEY'VE SMASHED THE BASE LIKE A MATCHBOX!,' GASPED RODRIGO. 'BUT I WONDER HOW THEY DID IT, AND WITH WHAT?,' HE ADDED, EYEING THE BREACHED FIVE-METRE WALL OF DIOMEDES BASE, 'WHAT THE HELL DID THAT!'

ZORIN WALKED OVER AND CALMLY SAID:

- NOW IT'S MORE THAN CLEAR THEY SENT US FOR GREEN SPAWN. IT'LL TAKE US A FEW DAYS TO GET BACK, EVEN WITH THE NIRANGATERS.

THE BOYS LOOKED AT EACH OTHER DUMBFOUNDED.

- 'LOOKS LIKE ALL THAT TRAINING WAS FOR NOTHING,' DUOLORS GRUMBLED INDIGNANTLY.

SUDDENLY THEY HEARD A WHEEZING SOUND. THEY WENT TO CHECK. IT WAS THE BASE COMMANDER, COVERED IN BLOOD AND BARELY BREATHING.

- 'HOW MANY WERE THERE?,' A FEW DOZEN VOICES ASKED HIM, ALMOST IN CHORUS.

- 'I DON'T KNOW,' HE BARELY MUTTERED. 'BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ROTTEN HERE. ALL THE BOYS WERE GONE. THE GUARROONS KILLED THEM! FILTHY LIZARDS! BUT THAT FENCE WAS KNOCKED DOWN BY TRICKERY!'

SPEAKING, SPITTING BLOOD. THE PITIFUL REMAINS OF HIS UNIFORM SWAYED GROTESQUELY. ONE OF HIS LEGS WAS EVEN MISSING. HE TRIED TO REACH A SMALL STONE TO BRACE HIMSELF ON, BUT HIS STRENGTH WAS NOT ENOUGH. HE FELL ON HIS EYES. THEN SUDDENLY HE GASPED.

EVERYONE IN THE SQUAD LOOKED UP. PERHAPS THEY WERE ABOUT TO LEARN EVEN MORE UNPLEASANT TRUTHS. THEN, ONE AFTER ANOTHER, THEY SCATTERED TO EXPLORE THE BASE.

THE DEVASTATION WAS COMPLETE. HOLES WERE EVERYWHERE. BUT WHAT OUR ADVENTURERS DIDN'T KNOW WAS THAT SEVERAL GUARRON OUTPOSTS WERE HIDDEN AT THE REMAINS OF THE BASE'S COMMAND CENTER. THEY WERE PLAYING SOME STRANGE GAME OF THEIRS CALLED 'ORIMO', OR SO IT SAID ON THEIR CARDS. IT MOST LIKELY RESEMBLED SOME OF THE HUMAN GAMES. THEIR LASER CUTTERS WERE ON THEIR BELTS AND THEY JUST HAD NOTHING TO DO. THE GUARRON HAD LEFT THESE HEROES AS LIAISONS TO WARN THEM OF POSSIBLE DANGER WHILE THE DANCE OF DEATH LASTED. THEY HARDLY NUMBERED MORE THAN TEN OR FIFTEEN. BUT THEY WERE STILL DANGEROUS. AND TOO DANGEROUS.

- 'DOOLERS,' ZORIN WHISPERED, 'USE THE BONETIER RIFLE. NOW!'

SERGIO DUOLORS READIED THE STRANGE WEAPON THE SIZE OF A LARGER HAMMER, WHICH USED A SPECIAL MECHANISM AND GENERATED A POWERFUL SHOCK WAVE.

- 'NOW!' ROARED ZORIN. 'KNOCK THEM THE FUCK OUT!'

THE KINETIC WAVE WAS STRANGE TO SAY THE LEAST. AS WE KNOW FROM PHYSICS, THE MEDIUM OF PROPAGATION WAS CALLED A CONTINUOUS ELASTIC MEDIUM. A SPECIAL DRUM IN THE BACK OF THE WEAPON, CALLED AN EQUALIZER, CREATED WHAT WAS CALLED AN

OSCILLATION OF A CERTAIN NUMBER OF PARTICLES, WHICH WAS DIFFERENT FROM THE OSCILLATION OF THE PARTICLES OF THE ENVIRONMENT. ANOTHER DEVICE CALLED AN INTENSIFIER DETERMINED THE INTENSITY OF THE SPHERICAL WAVE GENERATED BY THE GUN. THE THIRD AND FINAL PART, CALLED A DIRECTION FINDER, CREATED ITS DIRECTED MOTION ALONG A CERTAIN COORDINATE. AND A POWERFUL 'BAAM!' FOLLOWED.

THE GUARRONS WERE LITERALLY CRUSHED LIKE COCKROACHES. THEIR SEVERED LIMBS SCATTERED AROUND THE BASE. EVEN THEIR HEADS WERE HARDLY RECOGNIZABLE AND LOOKED LIKE CRUSHED CARDBOARD BOXES. THEIR EYES WERE LEAKING. AND THE RIB CAGES OF THEIR CHESTS STUCK OUT LIKE BROKEN TOOTHPICKS. SUCH WAS THE EFFECT OF THE DREADED WEAPON IN QUESTION.

- 'GOOD WORK, DUOLORS,' ZORIN CALLED, 'IF WE GET BACK ALIVE, I'LL OFFER YOU UP FOR PROMOTION. WHAT WAS YOUR CURRENT RANK?'

- 'PRIVATE, SIR,' HE REPLIED BREATHLESSLY.

- EXCELLENT. NOW SEARCH THE STOREROOMS FOR ANYTHING ELSE THAT MIGHT BE OF USE TO US.

THEY RUMMAGED AROUND THE BASE FOR A LONG TIME. MAYBE MORE THAN FIVE HOURS. THEY SEARCHED EVERY POSSIBLE NOOK AND CRANNY FOR SUPPLIES, VARIOUS WEAPONS, ULTRAS, AND WHATNOT. THEY FOUND ALMOST NOTHING AND CAME BACK ANGRY. AND THERE WAS DEFINITELY A REASON WHY.

- 'WHAT WAS THE PURPOSE OF THEIR ATTACK ON THE BASE, SIR?,' DARED RODRIGO TO ASK. 'THEY TOOK ALMOST NOTHING OF USE.'

- 'DON'T BE SO SURE,' ZORIN COUNTERED HIM SOMEWHAT CALMLY. 'WHATEVER THEY WERE LOOKING FOR, THEY FOUND IT.'

SOME OF THE OTHERS WERE STILL FUSSING AND LOOKING AROUND, HOPING TO FIND SOME LOOT WORTH ALL THE WAY HERE.



- 'NOW ALL WE HAVE TO DO IS CONTACT THE OUTPOSTS THAT HAVE OUR BACK,' ZORIN CONTINUED. 'HOPEFULLY EVERYTHING IS ALRIGHT WITH THEM.'

- 'OUTPOST ALPHA, THIS IS TEAM BETA 1, 2, 3, DO YOU COPY?,' HE CALLED SOMEWHAT MECHANICALLY OVER THE CYCLOTRON SYNTHESIZER.

NOTHING.

- 'POST ALPHA, DO YOU READ?,' HE REPEATED.

THE SAME SILENCE.

ZORIN PALED.

- 'THEY'VE DISCOVERED OUR PLANS,' HE SAID. 'LET'S GET OUT OF HERE SOON! OTHERWISE THEY'LL WIPE US OUT!'

SUDDENLY THERE WAS A STRANGE NOISE BEHIND THEM. IT WAS LIKE A HUMMING. THEY HAD WALKED INTO A TRAP.

THE GUARRONS HAD DEVELOPED A RATHER EFFECTIVE FIGHTING TECHNIQUE, WHICH THEY CALLED 'TUL AI SOR' OR TRANSLATED AS 'SACK'. APPARENTLY THOSE WITH THE LASER CUTTERS HAD SOMEHOW MANAGED TO SIGNAL THE OTHERS, BUT HOW? THEY DIDN'T HAVE ANY TIME TO DO IT!

IT WAS NECESSARY TO MENTION HERE THAT THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THIS RACE WERE NOT STRATEGIC GENIUSES, BUT RELIED MOSTLY ON THE TACTICS OF SUDDEN AND LIGHTNING ATTACK. THEIR STRATEGIC PLAN INVOLVED THE CONSTANT EXHAUSTION OF THE ENEMY WITH A SERIES OF SUCH ATTACKS. EVERY AVERAGE PLATOON COMMANDER KNEW THIS. MOREOVER, ZORIN HAD SERIOUS COMBAT EXPERIENCE BEHIND HIM. BEFORE THE RAID ON THE DIOMEDES BASE, HE HAD FOUGHT TWO OTHER MILITARY CAMPAIGNS WITH A MORE LIMITED RANGE. THE FIRST HAD BEEN IN THE DEFENSE OF THE ELOHYN'S INTERRON FUEL REFINERY, AND THE OTHER HAD BEEN SO LONG AGO THAT HE DIDN'T EVEN REMEMBER IT ANYMORE! BACK

THEN HE HAD TRAINED HIMSELF TO BECOME AN 'ANGEL OF IMGRADON' AND DEFEND IT.

IT TURNED OUT, HOWEVER, THAT THEIR OPPONENT WASN'T AS SMART AS THEY EXPECTED, HE WAS SNEAKY, BUT NOT SMARTER THAN THEM. AT LEAST NOT THIS TIME.

THERE WERE ONLY FIVE OR SIX OTHER GUARRONS IN THE NEXT SECTION OF THE COMMAND CENTER. HEARING THE STRANGE SOUND OF THE KINETIC WEAPON, THEY HAD COME TO CHECK OUT WHAT WAS GOING ON.

ZORIN TOOK THEM DOWN WITH HIS ASSAULT RIFLE WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, BUT IT WASN'T UNTIL THE CORPSE OF ONE WAS FALLING THAT HE SPOTTED A SMALL POUCH OF QUISSON IN WHICH, FROM THE OUTLINE OF THE OBJECT, HIS TRAINED EYE RECOGNIZED AN AESONIAN THERMOBOMB.

- 'GET DOWN!,' HE DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TIME TO SHOUT.

SUCH AN ENORMOUS MASS OF EARTH AND ROCK DEBRIS ROSE THAT IT OVERWHELMED THE OTHERS. THEIR SHATTERED LEGS AND ARMS WERE CHARGING AROUND AS IF THEY WERE PART OF A CANNIBAL FEAST. THE ABOMINATION WAS COMPLETE! TORN PARTS OF THEIR HEADS HAD MINGLED WITH THE HYDRAULICS OF THEIR NANOBOTS. AND IT WASN'T FUN AT ALL! ZORIN KNEW THAT THE PRACTICE IN BOMBING WAS TO OPEN YOUR MOUTH AND PLUG YOUR EARS TO KEEP FROM GOING DEAF FROM THE SOUND WAVE CREATED BY THE EXPLOSION. WITH BOMBS IN THE ADVANCED FUTURE, HOWEVER, THIS WAS RELATIVELY USELESS. THE BOMB ITSELF PRODUCED A SPECIFIC THERMAL WAVE THAT COULD MELT EVEN THE STRONTIUM ARONAUT OF THE ZIRUARXS. THAT WAS EXACTLY WHAT HAPPENED TO ONE OF THEM. SPECIFICALLY, WITH THEIR MACHINE. IT BURST INTO FLAMES AND BEGAN TO SLOWLY MELT. THEN, NATURALLY, IT EXPLODED. THE FACT THAT THERE WASN'T TOO MUCH INTERRON FUEL IN THE TANK HELPED KEEP THE MIGHTY 'BOOM!' FROM OVERTAKING IT.

ZORIN LOOKED AROUND. IT SEEMED HE WAS THE ONLY SURVIVOR. HE TRIED TO TURN ON THE CYCLONIC SYNTHESIZER. HIS EARS HUMMED. THE GREENISH SENSOR LIGHT REPORTED THAT THE DEVICE WAS WORKING. THE SMALL DISPLAY REPORTED SOMETHING DIFFERENT, HOWEVER. THE STRAIGHT LINE TRANSFORMED INTO AN IRREGULAR SINE WAVE AND HE HEARD:

'NOBODY'S GETTING OUT OF HERE! UGHORN LEGOL!'

IT WAS BEYOND BELIEF, WHOEVER THAT VOICE BELONGED TO COULD REPRODUCE HUMAN SPEECH WITHOUT MUCH DIFFICULTY. WHAT THE HELL WAS GOING ON HERE?

IF THEY'VE LEFT TWO WHOLE PLATOONS HANGING AROUND A RUINED BASE THAT NO ONE IS GOING TO BENEFIT FROM IN THE NEAR FUTURE, AND IT'S GOING TO TAKE A LOT OF RESOURCES TO REBUILD IT, THERE'S OBVIOUSLY SOMETHING IMPORTANT GOING ON!' HE MUTTERED UNDER HIS BREATH, PREPARING TO FIGHT FROM ANY POSITION.

HE TRIED TO CONTACT THE ZIRUARX WHO WERE ONLY A FEW MILES AWAY. AGAIN HE GOT NO REPLY.

'I'M NOT GOING TO LET SOME REPTILES TORTURE ME LIKE A DOG,' AS IT BRIEFLY CROSSED HIS MIND TO BLAST HIS OWN HEAD WITH HIS BLASTER, BUT AFTER A BRIEF MOMENT OF HESITATION HE CHANGED HIS MIND.

HE CRAWLED OVER TO THE NEAREST ZIRUARX THAT HAD BEEN LEFT ALMOST UNTOUCHED BY THE EXPLOSION AND CRAMMED HIMSELF INSIDE. THE COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT WAS INTACT. HE MADE A THIRD ATTEMPT AT COMMUNICATION USING THE ENCRYPTED FREQUENCIES. HE HEARD SOME STRANGE WHISPER-LIKE NOISE. NO VOICE OR RESPONSE.

HE INSTANTLY DARTED TO THE COCKPIT AND SEALED THE MACHINE FOR SECONDS. THE OZARIUM HATCH MADE THE MACHINE ABSOLUTELY INACCESSIBLE TO ANY KIND OF LIGHTER WEAPON, EXCEPT FOR ESONIUM BOMBS AND PROTON BOMBS. NO AMOUNT OF

MACHINE GUN FIRE, LASER CUTTERS, OR PLASMA RIFLES WOULD EVEN SCRATCH ITS COMPOSITE ALLOY.

SUDDENLY THE BUZZING IN HIS HEAD INTENSIFIED AND BLOOD DRIPPED FROM HIS NOSE. HE SENSED SOMETHING WAS WRONG.

- 'THIS MACHINE WILL BE YOUR GRAVE, MAN!,' THE STRANGE VOICE SOUNDED AGAIN.

AFTER A WHILE THE HIGH PRESSURE MADE HIS HEAD BURST LIKE A RIPE WATERMELON. HE WAS DEAD IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD. RODRIGO, DUOLORS, AND THE OTHERS TOO.

THE FOCUS OF LONG AND EXHAUSTING PREPARATIONS HAD NOT PREPARED THEM FOR ANYTHING VERY IMPORTANT. TO EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED. EVEN IF THAT UNEXPECTED, WAS BEYOND THEIR IMAGINATION OF ANYTHING POSSIBLE. AND THE ENEMY WAS WELL VERSED IN JUST THAT. AND HE HAD WON THIS BATTLE. WITH MINIMAL CASUALTIES.

NOW DIOMEDES' BASE SEEMED MORE FORLORN EVEN THAN BEFORE. AND SCARIER EVEN THAN RODWELL. A VERITABLE ABODE OF DEATH. THEY WERE NEVER COMING HOME. BUT EVEN IF THEY HAD THAT CHANCE - IT WOULDN'T EXIST IN JUST A FEW HOURS. THEY SIMPLY HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING IT ANYMORE. NOR COULD THEY SENSE IT. THEY HAD ALREADY LOST. FOREVER! OR MAYBE NOT QUITE?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: ZORIN

WHEN YOU'VE HAD A SILVER SPOON IN YOUR MOUTH ALMOST ALL YOUR LIFE, WHEN YOUR PARENTS HAVE PROVIDED YOU WITH A GOOD EDUCATION, AND WHEN YOU'RE A MILITARY DOCTOR ON TOP OF THAT, YOU SOMEHOW BEGIN TO SEE THE WORLD WITH DIFFERENT EYES. NEOLA WAS STRANGELY TRYING TO FORGET ABOUT HER POOR CHILDHOOD BEFORE SHE WAS ADOPTED BY HER WEALTHY

GUARDIANS. THE IMMENSE HARDSHIPS SHE HAD TO GO THROUGH TO REACH THE TOP. AND THAT SAME PEAK WAS DEFINITELY NOT WHAT SHE EXPECTED. THAT PEAK WAS DECEPTIVE AND BUILT ON TOO MANY ILLUSIONS. DISASTROUS ILLUSIONS. BUT THIS 'STAIN', AS SHE CALLED HER ORIGINS, WOULD STAND AS LONG AS SHE LIVED AND REMIND HER THAT SHE HAD ACCOMPLISHED ALMOST NOTHING ON HER OWN. THAT HER FALSE BRILLIANCE HAD BEEN BESTOWED UPON HER BY FATE.

HER STUDIES IN THE MEDICAL CORPS HAD BEEN ENTIRELY COVERED BY THE MANY EX-CAL CREDITS THAT WERE THE CURRENCY OF THE FUTURE. TO DO EVEN THE SIMPLEST MATH, IT WAS EQUIVALENT TO THE ANNUAL UPKEEP OF AN ENTIRE PLATOON OF ELITE SOLDIERS. THE REASON THEY VALUED IT WAS FAR DIFFERENT THAN BEING ABLE TO PERFORM BASE MANIPULATION. FOR EXAMPLE, SHE WAS ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR PUTTING NARENZIE IDENTIFICATION CHIPS ON SOME SOLDIERS' HEADS. AND THAT COULDN'T BE DONE BY JUST ANYONE.

THE HEADHUNTERS RADSOIL AND EDWARD MIGHT HAVE BEEN INSUFFICIENT TO GET HER WHERE SHE WAS GOING. THAT WAS MORE THAN CLEAR. AND ENDWHITE WAS A HIDDEN LEMON, TOO.

WHILE NEOLA WAS BUSY WITH HER THOUGHTS, SASIA HAD ALREADY FINISHED REPAIRING THE SPEEDER. BEHIND HER BACK, ENDWIGHT WAS PREPARING TO LAND THE INSIDIOUS BLOW AND CARRY OUT HER PLANS TO GET AWAY. BUT SUDDENLY SOMETHING UNFORESEEN HAPPENED.

AS IF OUT OF NOWHERE, ZORIN EMERGED, BLEEDING AND BARELY BREATHING. BUT HOW WAS THAT POSSIBLE SINCE HE WAS ALREADY DEAD? ACTUALLY, HE WASN'T. FEW KNEW, AND WERE INDEED AWARE, THAT ANY COMMANDER, EVEN THE MOST INFERIOR, WAS TOO PRECIOUS TO BE SACRIFICED. THAT'S WHY THE ONE KILLED IN THE ZIRUARX WAS HIS CLONE. BUT WHY WASN'T THIS TOLD TO THE YOUNG RECRUITS? FOR ONE SIMPLE REASON - THEY WOULD IN NO WAY ACCEPT SUCH INEQUALITY! MOREOVER, HE WAS EXPECTED TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO BOLDLY ENTER COMBAT! ZORIN WAS CAPABLE

OF TELEPATHIC COMMUNICATION WITH HIS CLONE-DOUBLE, BUT IT WAS DEFINITELY AFFECTING HIS HEALTH. HE HAD FELT A STRANGE INTERFERENCE WITH THE THOUGHTS, OR SEMBLANCE OF SUCH, AS THE IRENEGETIAN NANOCODE OF THE HUMANOID ANDROIDS WAS CURTLY CALLED. SOMEONE WAS VERY EXPERTLY FINGERING AS IF THEY WERE STRETCHING THE STRINGS OF SOME MUSICAL INSTRUMENT. BUT WHO WAS THIS SOMEONE? COMMUNICATION WAS VIA AN EMBEDDED CHIP IN THE BRAIN'S LIMBIC SYSTEM, WHERE INCOMING INFORMATION WAS STORED. SOMETIMES ZORIN RECEIVED TOO MUCH INFORMATION FROM HIS CLONE, WHICH CAUSED HIM A HUGE HEADACHE, BUT THE FORESIGHTED BIOENGINEERS HAD ARRANGED FOR A SPECIAL METHOD OF SHUTTING DOWN THE COMMUNICATION, IN ORDER TO AVOID OVERLOADING THE BRAIN, AND THUS POSSIBLE BRAIN DEATH. THE CREATURE THAT HAD DELIBERATELY 'KILLED' THE ANDROID WAS APPARENTLY TRYING TO GET TO ZORIN'S BRAIN AS WELL, BUT STILL WITHOUT SUCCESS. THIS WAS WHAT WAS CALLED BIO-OBJECT IMPACT, BUT IN THIS CASE ZORIN WASN'T EVEN SURE IF HIS OPPONENT WAS FLESH AND BLOOD. AND WHAT WAS GOING ON ANYWAY? APPARENTLY SOMEONE WAS QUITE SERIOUSLY INTERESTED IN KILLING HIM, AND RATHER SNEAKILY AT THAT.

HE'D TAKEN THE HUGE DISTANCE FROM SYNTHROS TO RODWELL WITH ONE OF THE NIRANGAITERS. WHY HADN'T HE GONE BACK TO IMGRADON? VERY SIMPLE - GOING TO RODWELL WAS A SURE WAY TO GET MORE SERIOUS WEAPONS, OR AT LEAST SOME COMMUNICATIONS EQUIPMENT. AND HE WASN'T WRONG. OF COURSE HE'D BEEN WANDERING AROUND THE PILES OF JUNK IN THE CEMETERY FOR A WHILE. HE'D BEEN TRYING TO FIND SOMETHING HE COULD USE. HE HADN'T TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT THE SMALL FACT THAT THAT WAS WHERE THE PIRATE DESERTERS WERE LURKING, WITH DUBIOUS INTENTIONS OF COOPERATING WITH A REPRESENTATIVE OF THE MILITARY IN IMGRADON. THERE WAS NO TELLING HIM THAT THEY EVEN HAD AN UPRIGHT AIRCRAFT.

HAD THEY SEEN HIM EARLIER, THEY PROBABLY WOULD HAVE GONE INTO HIDING, BUT IT WAS TOO LATE AND THERE WAS NO MOVING. SOMETHING JUST HAD TO BE DONE.

- 'LEGITIMIZE YOURSELF RIGHT NOW,' ENDWHITE TRIED TO LOOK SCARY, POINTING HIS BLASTER AT THE SERGEANT.

ZORIN WASN'T GOING TO DEAL WITH ANY NONSENSE. IT JUST WASN'T HIS STYLE. HE RAISED HIS HANDS HYPOCRITICALLY, BUT WITH NO REAL INTENTION OF SURRENDERING. AS HE APPROACHED, HE TWISTED HIS HAND BEHIND THE BACK OF HIS HEAD IN A FLASH AND POINTED THE BLASTER AT HIS HEAD. SASIA HAD A TRAINED EYE AND REFLEXES, BUT EVEN SHE COULDN'T REACT THIS TIME.

- 'WHERE ARE THE OTHERS?,' ASKED ZORIN. 'TAKE ME TO YOUR BOSS?'

- 'I'M SASIA ...,' THE PILOT BEGAN.

- 'I DON'T CARE WHO YOU ARE,' ZORIN CUT HER OFF. 'DO AS YOU'RE TOLD. OTHERWISE, SHOOT,' HIS FINGER RAN DOWN THE TRIGGER.

NEOLA ALMOST SQUEALED WHEN SHE SAW WHO WAS STANDING IN FRONT OF HER. BUT SHE HURRIED TO HIDE. BUT ZORIN DIDN'T PARTICULARLY CARE. HE WAS DETERMINED TO SHOW THEM THAT THEY HAD TO TAKE HIM SERIOUSLY.

RADSOIL AND EDWARD TRIED TO REACH FOR THEIR WEAPONS, BUT ZORIN SHOT THEM WITHOUT BLINKING AN EYE. THAT LEFT ONLY SASIA AND ENDWIGHT. THEY WERE DEFINITELY GOING TO BE OF USE. AND HE ASKED ONE LAST QUESTION:

- CAN THIS SPEEDER FLY?

- 'IT CAN,' WAS SASIA'S ANSWER. 'I JUST FIXED IT.'

ZORIN DIDN'T WANT TO TAKE ANY CHANCES, HAVING STUNNED THE TWO LARGE MEN, HE TIED THE PILOT DOWN SO AS NOT TO GET IN HIS WAY. ENDWIGHT WAS PARALYZED WITH A SPECIAL KICK THAT ZORIN

HADN'T TAUGHT THE ROOKIE. STILL, NO MATTER HOW SELLOUT THE COMMAND WAS, HIS CHANCES OF SHINING WERE CONSIDERABLE. EVEN WITHOUT GOVERNOR ELMBAUM, THERE WAS NO ONE TO EVALUATE HIM. BUT ALL IN GOOD TIME.

ZORIN PICKED UP A METAL ROD, WHICH HE BEGAN USING TO HIT THE TWO WHEREVER HE COULD FIND THEM. THEY WERE TIED SECURELY WITH IRRETIA STRINGS HE HAD FOUND IN THE CEMETERY. THEIR SUITS RATTLED LIKE EMPTY TIN CANS, BUT THEY DIDN'T SEEM TO FEEL IT. AFTER A WHILE THEY CAME OUT OF THEIR REVERIE.

- 'LISTEN TO ME CAREFULLY,' HE GROWLED AT THEM, 'IF YOU DON'T COOPERATE, YOU'LL JUST DIE FROM SUIT DECOMPRESSION. WHO ARE YOU?'

THEY BOTH PALED. BUT THESE WERE PROFESSIONAL SOLDIERS AFTER ALL. THEY WEREN'T GOING TO GIVE UP THAT EASILY. SO IN DEFIANCE, THEY CONTINUED TO REMAIN SILENT.

WITHOUT SAYING ANOTHER WORD, ZORIN CAREFULLY POKED A SMALL HOLE IN THE LACES OF THEIR SUITS AND HELMETS.

- 'WAIT,' RADSOIL BARELY MUTTERED. 'NEOLA'S GUILTY.'

- 'HUH?,' ZORIN JUST GAPED. 'SO THERE WERE OTHERS. VERY INTERESTING. WHERE IS SHE?'

- 'DOWN IN THE CAVES,' EDWARD JOINED IN.

ZORIN LEFT THEM WITHOUT PAYING ATTENTION. SOON THE DECOMPRESSION WOULD FINISH THEM OFF COMPLETELY. BUT HE COULDN'T LEAVE THE PILOT ALONE. SHE WAS TOO VALUABLE. AND SHE HAD TO CATCH THAT NEOLA, TOO.

IT WASN'T LONG BEFORE HE CAUGHT UP TO HER AND PINNED HER TO THE GROUND. SHE SCREAMED AND STRUGGLED, BUT ZORIN MANAGED TO RESTRAIN HER.

- 'THERE MAY BE A SLIGHT CHANGE IN YOUR PLANS,' HE SAID BREATHLESSLY.



WHEN THEY RETURNED THEY SAW THAT THERE WAS INDEED ONLY ROOM FOR FOUR IN THE SPEEDER. ZORIN SAT FURTHEST BACK, KEEPING AN EYE ON ALL THREE OF THEM. ONE WRONG MOVE ON THEIR PART AND HE'D BLOW THEIR BRAINS OUT. AND WITH A CLEAR CONSCIENCE AT THAT.

- 'WHAT WILL BE THE COURSE OF THE FLIGHT,' SASIA TRIED TO ASK HIM IN A COOL VOICE.

- 'WELL, GIVEN WHAT YOUR COLLEAGUE TOLD ME, I THINK I'M REALLY GOING TO FLY IN YOUR DIRECTION!,' REPLIED ZORIN UNPERTURBED.

SASIA WAS LIKE BEING STRUCK BY THUNDER. BUT SHE STEELED HERSELF AND SAID.

- THIS FLIGHT COULD BE EXTREMELY RISKY AND WE COULD ALL DIE. ARE YOU SURE YOUR BODY WILL BE ABLE TO TAKE THE STRAIN? WE DON'T HAVE SPECIAL SPACESUITS, AND I DID THE CALCULATIONS UNDER VERY PRIMITIVE CONDITIONS. WE MAY NOT BE ABLE TO DOCK WITH ANOTHER VEHICLE AT ALL.

- 'YOU TALK TOO MUCH, MY GIRL,' ZORIN REPLIED IN A SLIGHTLY ALTERED VOICE, 'YOU OBVIOUSLY HAVEN'T NOTICED THE STATE I ARRIVED HERE IN. THAT WE ARE FROM TWO OPPOSING CAMPS DOESN'T CHANGE THINGS MUCH. WE CAN HELP EACH OTHER. YOU ARE DESERTERS AND I AM A FAILED COMMANDER. I HAVE TACTICAL KNOWLEDGE THAT THOSE PSEUDO-COMMANDOS DOWN THERE DON'T, BUT I HAVE ANOTHER QUALITY THAT IS EVEN RARER. I CAN READ MINDS. AND I CAN SEE VERY EASILY WHEN SOMEONE IS TRYING TO THROW ME OVERBOARD,' HIS VOICE HELD AN UNCONCEALED THREAT.

- 'LET'S TAKE OFF THEN,' SASIA CONFIRMED. 'EVERYTHING IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY.'

ZORIN KEPT WATCHING THEM, BUT NONE OF THEM MOVED. THE SPEEDER PEELED SMOOTHLY FROM THE SURFACE. THE THRUST OF THE FOUR MAIN ENGINES HAD REACHED FULL POWER AND IT SLOWLY ROSE VERTICALLY. THEN CAME THE HARD PART. THEY NEEDED TO

REACH AN ACCELERATION THAT WOULD HELP THEM OVERCOME THE STRATOSPHERE AND GET OUT INTO NEAR SPACE IN OPEN ORBIT. HERE, THE TRAINED WARRIOR WAS NOT IN HIS OWN WATERS AT ALL. BUT HE HAD NO CHOICE. THERE WAS NO TURNING BACK. AND HE WAS A FUGITIVE LIKE THEM.

GRADUALLY, AS THE MACHINE ROSE, EVERYTHING BEGAN TO BLUR BEFORE HIS EYES. IT WAS DEFINITELY DIFFERENT THAN THE ZIRUARX HERE, BUT HE HAD TO ENDURE. HIS BODY WAS CLAD IN RADSOIL'S SPACESUIT. IT WAS A LITTLE WIDE FOR HIM, DESPITE HIS EXTRAORDINARILY BROAD SHOULDERS. THEY'D GLUED THE SMALL HOLE SHUT WITH EMBOSSED FABRIC GLUE. EVERYONE WAS REQUIRED TO CARRY A SMALL TUBE IN ORDER TO PREVENT MORE REVERSIBLE DECOMPRESSIONS IF THE SUIT'S INTEGRITY WAS COMPROMISED. ZORIN HOPED IT WOULD LAST. HE EVEN PRAYED OUT LOUD. HE COULD FEEL THE FIRST SIGNS OF THAT PARTICULAR CRUSH ON HIS OWN BODY. AND THE PAIN WAS SERIOUS. HE GRITTED HIS TEETH. AND TIGHTER STILL HIS WEAPON, WHICH HE KEPT POINTED AT THE BACKS OF THE THREE OF THEM.

IT WAS NECESSARY TO MENTION THAT THE ATMOSPHERE OF ZEGANDARIA CONSISTED OF ONLY TWO LAYERS, THE STRATOSPHERE AND THE EXOSPHERE. THERE WAS NO PRESENCE OF AN OZONE LAYER OR THICK AND DENSE CLOUDS OF HYDROGEN SULFIDE. JUST THICK LAYERS OF HAZE THAT CONSISTED MAINLY OF WATER AND METHANE AND VARIOUS GASES. AND AS WE SAID, IT WAS POISONOUS AND SUFFOCATING. THE PLANET'S ECCENTRIC ORBIT MADE SOME OF ITS REGIONS A VERITABLE DESERT, WHILE OTHERS WERE SIMPLY SUBJECT TO REGULAR DOWNPOURS. RODWELL, WHERE THEY HAD PRACTICALLY TAKEN OFF FROM, WAS JUST SUCH A DESTINATION. SASIA WOULD HAVE CHOSEN A FAR MORE COMFORTABLE LOCATION ON A WHIM, BUT UNFORTUNATELY THAT WAS IMPOSSIBLE.

REACHING THE STRATOSPHERE DIDN'T TAKE THEM TOO LONG. MAYBE ABOUT TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES OR EVEN LESS. IT WAS DIFFICULT TO POSITION THEMSELVES IN THE EXOSPHERE, WHERE

THE SITUATION WAS QUITE DIFFERENT. THE HULL OF THE MACHINE HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO CRACK. ALTHOUGH IT WAS A MODERN COMBAT SPEEDER, IT WAS NOT SUITED FOR SPACE TRAVEL.

- 'WE'VE MADE IT,' SASIA SAID AFTER THEY'D BEEN SHUDDERING IN A STATE OF VERY LOW GRAVITY FOR OVER AN HOUR. 'NOW GET SOME OXYGEN FROM THE RESERVE CAPSULES. GET THE ERRONIAN VESTS READY AS WELL.'

THESE VESTS WERE SPECIAL. MADE OF EXTREMELY STRONG BD 18 GRADE QUIZON, THEY WERE USED FOR HANGING ROPES AND OTHER ODDITIES. THEY WOULD GO OUT INTO OPEN SPACE, BUT NOT BEFORE ALERTING PATROLLING SHIPS. 'THE EMSATO 199 WAS THE CLOSER ONE AND IT WOULD HAVE BEEN MORE CONVENIENT TO BOARD. YES, THEY WERE GOING TO BE REAL PIRATES NOW.

- 'GET THE WEAPONS READY, BUT HIDE THEM,' SASIA ORDERED.

ZORIN OBEYED HER, AS HERE HE HAD NO DOUBT THEY WERE GOING TO PLAY HIS NUMBERS. THEY ALL POURED OUT OF THE SHIP'S RUMEN AND FLOATED LIKE BABIES INTO THEIR MOTHER'S AMNIOTIC WATERS. THEN THEY MANAGED TO ATTACH SPECIAL BOARDING HOOKS AND SECURE THEMSELVES TO THE HULL OF THE PATROL SHIP. WHETHER THEY WANTED TO OR NOT, THEY HAD TO ACT AS A TEAM.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: EMZIROU

THE BRIGHT SPOT GREW LARGER. AND IT WAS CLOSING IN ON KENJI'S LITTLE ESCAPE POD WITH EXTRAORDINARY SPEED. ITS OUTLINE STOOD OUT VERY VAGUELY, BUT HE WAS ABLE TO MAKE OUT 'EMZIROU'. IT COULDN'T BE! HE HAD HEARD THAT NAME! IT WAS SURELY A LARGE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE THAT COULD BRING HIM TO A SAFE HAVEN! BUT HOW COULD HE GET HER ATTENTION!

HE WAS UNABLE TO STEER THE CAPSULE AS HE WISHED, FOR HE COULD EASILY VEER FROM ITS FLIGHT PATH. AND THE AUTOPILOT MIGHT NOT BE ACTIVATED QUICKLY ENOUGH, AND HE MIGHT LOSE THIS LAST CHANCE OF CONTACT WITH OTHER INTELLIGENT BEINGS IN OPEN SPACE, DOOMING HIMSELF TO A SLOW DOOM. BUT IT COULD HAVE DONE SOMETHING ELSE! HE PULLED OUT A SMALL EXONIUM BOMB HE HAD CAREFULLY STASHED IN HIS SPACESUIT. HE DROPPED IT INTO A SPECIAL LAUNCHER ON THE FLARES, AND FROM THERE THE BOMB WAS SIMPLY SUCKED OUT OF VACUUM AND FLEW OUT INTO OPEN SPACE.

AT FIRST NOTHING HAPPENED. THERE WAS ABSOLUTELY NO EFFECT. BUT LATER, THE SHOCK WAVE CREATED BY THE EXPLOSION SEEMED TO STIR UP THE SPACE DUST AND ROCKS THAT PASSED DANGEROUSLY CLOSE TO ITS LITTLE LIFE-SAVING SHELL. YES, THE CLOUD IN QUESTION WAS VERY SMALL AGAINST THE INFINITE EXPANSE, BUT THE SHUTTLE SEEMED TO NOTICE IT.

THE EMZIROU ACTIVATED RED LIGHTS THAT WERE ON EITHER SIDE OF ITS HULL. IT WAS A DISTRESS OR ALARM SIGNAL. GRADUALLY, THE SHUTTLE BEGAN TO APPROACH THE APPROPRIATE DESTINATION.

SPECIAL AILERON ROPES, MUCH STRONGER THAN THE ZERETHIUM ONES, WERE LAUNCHED FROM THE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE TO THE OTHER SMALL CRAFT. THEY BEGAN TO PULL IT TO A CLOSE ENOUGH DISTANCE WHERE AN ARTIFICIAL GRAVITATIONAL FIELD CREATED BY THE SHUTTLE WOULD NOW SUCK THE CAPSULE IN. THIS TOOK LONG ENOUGH, DUE TO THE FACT THAT THERE WERE QUITE A FEW PROBLEMS WITH FIXING THE CAPSULE, DUE TO ITS EXTREMELY UNCONVENTIONAL SHAPE, WHICH RESEMBLED A SEMI-CURVED RHOMBOID WITH THE TIPS CUT OFF.

IT WAS STILL DANGEROUS AS MANY THINGS COULD GO WRONG. ONCE THE GRAVITATIONAL FIELD WAS ACTIVATED, THE CAPSULE LURCHED A BIT CLUMSILY BEFORE ENTERING THE LARGER SPACE BEAST'S RUMEN. 'EMZIROU' HAD MADE IT. IT HAD BEEN SAVED!

SOMEONE WAS TRYING TO OPEN THE CAPSULE, BUT APPARENTLY WITHOUT MUCH SUCCESS SO FAR. KENJI WAS WEARING A SPACESUIT SO EVEN HER UNSEALING WOULDN'T BE LETHAL TO HIM. THEY COULD MAKE OUT VARIOUS VAGUE SILHOUETTES THAT HAD CROWDED AROUND.

KENJI FELT LIKE A NEWBORN THAT WOULD LEAVE ITS MOTHER'S COMFORTABLE WOMB AT ANY MOMENT AND RETURN TO THE HOSTILE OUTSIDE WORLD. AFTER A FEW MINUTES THEY REMOVED THE ENDOSIAN COVER AND HE SAW FACES HE THOUGHT HE HAD SEEN SOMEWHERE.

CAPTAIN DAVID PENROSE GREETED HIM, GRINNING EAR TO EAR. THEY HAD JUST RETURNED FROM THE COLONY, WHERE THEY HAD STOWED ALL THE NECESSARY PROVISIONS AND EQUIPMENT. PINDOR WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO HAD MANAGED TO MAKE IT ONTO THE SHIP, AND LIROITH AND THE OTHERS WERE STILL THERE, WHERE A PRISON RIOT OF UNSUSPECTED PROPORTIONS HAD BROKEN OUT. THE COLONY, AS WE KNOW, CONSISTED OF OVER FIVE HUNDRED PRISONERS AND AT LEAST SIX HUNDRED GUARDS, SEPARATELY ADMINISTRATIVE AND COMMAND STAFF. IN ALL ABOUT SIX HUNDRED MEN. AND THAT WAS NO SMALL NUMBER FOR SUCH A REMOTE POINT.

EVEN AS VIAR'S GREASY FACE CAME INTO VIEW AND HE SAW THE OVERLY STRONG GUARDS, IT WAS CLEAR TO CAPTAIN PENROSE THAT SOMETHING WAS AMISS. OF COURSE, THEY WERE ONLY SERVING THE FINAL DESTINATION AND THERE WAS NO REASON TO GET MIXED UP IN THIS IF THEY PRETENDED THEY DIDN'T SEE ANYTHING. THE CAPTAIN FEARED THE SHUTTLE WOULD BE DETAINED AND THEY ARRESTED AT THE COLONY. BUT, THANKFULLY, NO SUCH THING HAPPENED.

PINDOR HAD SAVED HIMSELF IN A VERY STRANGE AND UNUSUAL WAY. HE WAS HALF DEAD WHEN LIROITH AND THE OTHERS CAME OUT OF THEIR COMFORTABLE HIDING PLACE AND ATTACKED THE UNSUSPECTING GUARDS. THEY WERE ARMED WITH SIMPLE ASTERON CUTTERS THEY HAD STOLEN FROM THE WAREHOUSES AND

QUARRIES. COMBINED WITH THE SURPRISE ATTACK, THEY HAD GAINED A SIGNIFICANT ADVANTAGE.

PINDOR'S HALF-OPENED EYES HAD MIRACULOUSLY REMAINED UNTOUCHED WHEN A PLASMA BLAST HAD TORN THROUGH HIS COLLAR AND HE WAS ONLY LEFT STANDING THANKS TO THE SUIT'S HYDRAULICS. THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE ORDEAL HE HAD WALKED ALMOST AS IF IN A DREAM, SINCE THE HYDRAULICS WERE CONTROLLED BY THE NEUROIMPUSES GENERATED BY THE PRISONERS' BRAINS, SO THEY COULD GET TO THEIR FEET EVEN IF A GUARD ENTERED THEIR CELL IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT. THE DISTANCE BETWEEN THE EXECUTION SITE AND THE SHUTTLE WAS LESS THAN A HUNDRED METERS, AND PINDOR WAS NOT RELYING ON HIS OWN STRENGTH, BUT ON THE LITTLE REMAINING ENERGY POWERING THIS EXOSKELETON OF BIOBATTERIES.

NO ONE HAD PAID ATTENTION TO HIM, FOR THE PLASMA BLASTS HAD KICKED UP ENOUGH DUST AND BROKEN CRYSTALS TO DISTRACT ATTENTION FROM HIM FOR A TIME WHILE THE GUARDS TRIED TO RESTRAIN THE PRISONERS.

ONE OF THE SHUTTLE CREW HAD SPOTTED HIM WHEN HE WAS ABOUT TEN METERS AWAY FROM THEM. THEY WERE JUST FINISHING UNLOADING. VIAR HAD RETREATED WITH HIS RETINUE, BUT AS BAD LUCK WOULD HAVE IT, AN ACCIDENTAL BOUNCE HAD HIT HIM IN THE SUIT'S TETHER AND HE COULD HAVE VERY EASILY DIED OF DECOMPRESSION. HIS PROXIMITY TO THE TRANSPORT SHUTTLE SAVED HIM. HE JUST WALKED INSIDE, NOT REALIZING WHAT HE WAS DOING. CAPTAIN PENROSE WAS SPEECHLESS AS A LARGE MAN WEARING A BATTERED SPACESUIT STOOD IN FRONT OF HIM, FOAM COMING OUT OF HIS MOUTH AND BLOOD ALL OVER HIS FACE. HE IMMEDIATELY NOTICED THE DENT IN THE SUIT AS WELL.

- 'SEAL THE BREACH QUICKLY,' HE ORDERED. 'WE HAVE A NANOPROBE ON BOARD FOR EMERGENCIES.'

THE SMALL NANOPROBE WAS IMMEDIATELY SWITCHED ON AND BEGAN TENDING TO THE WOUND, CAREFULLY PATCHING THE HOLE IN THE SUIT.

THE SHUTTLE WAS BEING FIRED AT HARD BY THE PLASMA WEAPONS, BUT ONCE THEY TURNED ON THE SHIELD, IT BECAME VIRTUALLY UNTOUCHABLE BY THOSE ORDINARY WEAPONS. THEY NEEDED PROTON BOMBS, AND THERE WERE NONE ON THE COLONY.

PINDOR WAS STILL PICKING UP A SOUL ON A GRAVITY BED AND WAS IN A WAKING COMA FROM WHICH HE MIGHT NEVER EMERGE. NO ONE ON BOARD HAD THE MEDICAL TRAINING TO CARE FOR HIS WOUNDS MORE PROFESSIONALLY, AND ONLY THE NANOPROBE AND STRONG ANTIBIOTICS GIVEN TO HIM FROM TIME TO TIME BY THE CAPTAIN KEPT HIM IN A STATE OF LETHARGY.

KENJI COULDN'T HELP BUT NOTICE IT. HE WAS PRISONER 421, WHOM HE HAD PERSONALLY TRANSPORTED TO THIS HELLHOLE.

PENROSE NOTICED HIS REACTION.

- 'ADMIRAL, WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO YOU!,' HE ASKED SERIOUSLY.

- I DON'T KNOW EITHER, BUT THE WHOLE CREW OF THE SHIP JUST DISAPPEARED,' HE MUTTERED.

PENROSE GAVE HIM A PUZZLED LOOK. BUT RATHER TENSELY. HE REALISED THAT THEY MIGHT AS WELL NOT HAVE RETURNED SAFELY TO ZEGANDARIA AT ALL.

KENJI WALKED OVER TO THE CELLMATE'S BED AND LOOKED AT HIM. HE DEFINITELY LOOKED CALM NOW. SOME PARTICULAR BLISS WAS WRITTEN ALL OVER HIS FACE. THE NANOPROBE HAD USED A SPECIAL DIFFUSION PROCESS OF A SPECIAL COAGULANT AND A SPECIAL VACUUM PROBE TO SUCK DRIED BLOOD AND FOAM FROM THE SUFFERER'S FACE. THIS TOOK A FEW MINUTES.

- 'WHO KNOWS WHAT HAPPENED!,' SAID KENJI INDIGNANTLY.

- 'WE ARE SOLDIERS, REAR ADMIRAL. BUT A HUGE MUTINY HAS BROKEN OUT IN THE COLONY. 'IT'S NOT SAFE FOR US TO GO BACK THERE,' PENROSE ADDED RATHER GUILTILY.

- 'BUT WE CAN GO BACK ABOARD THE ENZORIA AND USE ITS RESOURCES, CAN'T WE,' KENJI ASKED.

PENROSE HESITATED. THAT WAS QUITE OUT OF THE CHARTER. HOW COULD HE REFUSE A SUPERIOR OFFICER, PLUS IF THERE WAS A MUTINY IN THE COLONY, AND SOMETHING SO UNUSUAL HAD HAPPENED TO THE ENZORIA, THEY WOULDN'T BE WELCOMED WITH OPEN ARMS ON ZEGANDARIA. FINALLY, HE MADE UP HIS MIND.

- 'SET A RUNNING SPEED OF FOUR PARSECS,' ORDERED CAPTAIN PENROSE.

THE SPACEWALK WAS DEFINITELY SOMETHING STRANGE. GRAVITY, EVEN IN THE DISTANT FUTURE, WAS FULL OF MANY UNCERTAINTIES. BUT ONE THING WAS CERTAIN, SUPERLUMINAL SPEED WAS POSSIBLE. TYPE THREE TACHYON ENGINES WERE CAPABLE OF WARPING SPACE AND FORMING SO-CALLED ZERO TIME TUNNELS. THE SPEED OF THE TACHYONS IN QUESTION WAS STRICTLY GREATER THAN THE MAXIMUM SPEED OF LIGHT IN A VACUUM. PENROSE NEVER TOOK EXCESSIVE RISKS. THERE WERE RUMORS OF CAPTAINS FOND OF THE EXPERIMENTS WHO HAD DISAPPEARED WITHOUT A TRACE AS A RESULT OF COURSE MISCALCULATIONS. ANOTHER UTTERLY DILETTANTE MISTAKE WAS TO STUMBLE UPON SOME MAGNETAR THAT WOULD SIMPLY TEAR THEIR FLESH TO SHREDS.

PINDOR WINCED. IT WAS HIGHLY UNUSUAL FOR SOMEONE WHO HAD FALLEN INTO AN AWAKE COMA TO DO SO, BUT ACCORDING TO MEDICAL THEORIES, THE PATIENT MIGHT AS WELL HAVE COME OUT OF THAT STATE SUDDENLY.

- 'WHERE AM I?,' HE ASKED WITH ALL HIS STRENGTH.

- 'SAFE,' KENJI ANSWERED HIM, 'THIS SHIP SAVED US BOTH, YOU'LL TELL ME ALL ABOUT IT WHEN YOU'RE BETTER.'



^^^

DAVID PENROSE CERTAINLY KNEW HIS BUSINESS, BUT WHAT WAS HIS SURPRISE WHEN, ON CHANGING COURSE, HE SPOTTED A FLYING OBJECT SOME 0, 1 ASTRONOMICAL UNITS AWAY.

- 'THERE'S SOMETHING THERE!', HE CRIED. 'YEAH, HEROES, BRACE YOURSELVES!'

- 'IT SAYS 'EMSATO 199',' KENJI CALLED.

- NO DOUBT, IT'S A COMPANION SHIP, BUT WHAT'S IT DOING ALL THE WAY OUT HERE, SO MANY LIGHT YEARS FROM ZEGANDARIA?

THE SHIP'S BATTERED HULL GAVE AWAY THE OBVIOUS PRESENCE OF AN ABOARDING PARTY. THERE WERE NO SIGNS OF LIFE. THE SHIP HAD ITS ENGINES SHUT DOWN. THE EMERGENCY LIGHTS WERE NOT ON EITHER.

- 'BE ON THE LOOKOUT,' ADDED PENROSE. 'GET THE PLASMA WEAPONS READY, JUST IN CASE.'

AFTER A WHILE THE SHIP WAS CLOSE ENOUGH TO THEM. HOWEVER, THERE WAS NO WAY THEY COULD RETRACT IT, AS IT WAS CONSIDERABLY LARGER THAN KENJI'S CAPSULE.

IT WOULD BE PROPER TO DESCRIBE THE FACT THAT THIS SHIP HAD NO REAL CHANCE OF FIGHTING EVEN AGAINST A HEAVILY ARMED TRANSPORT SHUTTLE LIKE THE EMZIROU. IT WAS ZORIN'S IDEA; WHO AS AN EXPERIENCED MILITARY MAN LIKED TO PRETEND HE WAS A 'DEAD FOX'. IT WAS ALL WELL PLANNED. THE CREW OF THE SHIP, WAS JETTISONED INTO OPEN SPACE, AGAIN ZORIN'S IDEA. HE DIDN'T CARE ABOUT THE METHODS AT ALL, AS LONG AS EVERYTHING WENT ACCORDING TO HIS VIEWS. HE HAD PREPARED HIMSELF WELL ENOUGH.

SASIA HAD NEVER OPERATED ANYTHING OTHER THAN A COMBAT SPEEDER AND WAS MAINLY FAMILIAR WITH AERIAL VEHICLE AVIONICS, BUT THIS WAS STILL A SPACESHIP. STILL, SHE HAD TRIED TO KEEP UP

AND KEEP THE SHIP ON AUTOPILOT UNTIL THEY OVERCAME THE PLANET'S GRAVITY. AFTER THAT, THEY FLOATED COMPLETELY FREE IN OPEN SPACE. THEY WERE NOT SPOTTED BY ANY PATROL OR OTHER SHIPS.

NEARLY TWO WEEKS WAS ENOUGH TO GET THEM SIGNIFICANTLY FAR FROM THE PLANET'S ORBIT.

'THE EMZIROU WAS ON FULL COMBAT ALERT. PENROSE SENT THE CREW FOR THE WEAPONS AND SETTLED HIMSELF IN THE SHUTTLE'S COCKPIT, GIVING THE VICE-CAPTAIN A CHANCE TO REST A BIT. AS SOON AS THEY WERE CLOSE ENOUGH, PENROSE ORDERED THE ENGINES AND ALL MAIN POWER TO THE EMZIROU SHUT DOWN. ONLY THE EMERGENCY POWER WAS LEFT RUNNING AT MINIMUM LOAD.

- 'THE CAPTAIN OF THIS SHIP IS VERY CLEVER,' ZORIN SAID. 'THIS IS GOING TO BE A GAME OF NERVES. HIS AGAINST OURS. BUT UNCLE ZORIN HAS DEALT WITH MORE SERIOUS OPPONENTS.'

SASIA, ENDWIGHT AND NEOLA JUST KEPT QUIET. THEIR HANDS WERE UNTIED, BUT ZORIN KEPT AN EYE ON THEM, AND THEY DIDN'T WANT TO RISK HIS PROVERBIAL GUNSLINGER'S REFLEXES.

- 'THINK OF ME AS A PRISONER,' HE SPOKE SUDDENLY. 'YOU WILL BE BELIEVED BECAUSE YOU ARE FROM UBUNDER. AND AN ELOHYN LIKE ME WOULD MAKE HIM A HEAD SHORTER.'

ZORIN QUICKLY INSTRUCTED THEM, EXPLAINING HOW TO EMBELLISH THE STORY TO MAKE IT MORE BELIEVABLE. NEOLA, KNEW WHAT HE WAS TALKING ABOUT.

- 'TIE HIM UP,' SHE ORDERED SASIA AND ENDWHITE.

THEY QUICKLY CARRIED OUT THE ORDER. ZORIN WAS BOUND FROM HEAD TO TOE.

- 'NOW TURN ON THE EMERGENCY LIGHTS,' ZORIN ADVISED THEM.

HIS INSTRUCTIONS WERE DULY CARRIED OUT.

PENROSE, HOWEVER, DID NOT FALL FOR THE TRAP.

- THERE MIGHT BE AN ARMY HIDING IN THAT SHELL. SEND JUST ONE OXYGENIST TO UNPRESSURIZE HER HULL. IF THEY ENGAGE THEIR DEFENSES SUDDENLY, WE'LL OPEN DEADLY FIRE AND STILL INCINERATE THEM INSTANTLY.

THE OXYGENIST WAS PUT INTO A SPACESUIT AND SENT, TETHERED BY A THICK AELYRON ROPE, TO THE HULL OF THE COMPANION SHIP. HE LOST A LOT OF TIME WHILE CUTTING THE SHIP'S SYNTH HATCH. CERTAINLY SUCH A SIGHT IN OPEN SPACE LOOKED EXOTIC.

- 'THE CABIN IS UNPRESSURIZED,' HE RADIOED.

- 'ACKNOWLEDGED,' REPLIED PENROSE CURTLY.

- I SEE SEVERAL PEOPLE, THEY APPEAR TO BE UNARMED. TWO WOMEN AND TWO MEN. THEY APPEAR TO BE ONE OF OURS.

- 'DON'T BE SO SURE,' STAMMERED PENROSE. 'IT COULD JUST BE A HOAX. TAKE THEM OUT ONE BY ONE. JUST TO BE ON THE SAFE SIDE.'

AS SOON AS EVERYTHING WAS EXECUTED TO THE LAST COMMA, OUR ADVENTURERS FOUND THEMSELVES FACE TO FACE WITH THE CAPTAIN.

- 'WHO ARE YOU?,' HE ASKED THEM CALMLY. HIS EYES REGARDED THEM QUESTIONINGLY.

- 'I AM NEOLA, THE MILITARY DOCTOR. THIS IS ENDWHITE - ONE OF THE SOLDIERS, THIS IS SASIA,' A MILITARY PILOT, AND THIS IS ZORIN - AN ELOHYN COMMANDER.

PENROSE WHISTLED IN SURPRISE.

- 'AND WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING OFF TO WITH THAT PRISONER?,' HE SNEERED. 'HE HAD HOPED TO EASILY EXPOSE THEIR SHALLOW LIE.'

- 'ACTUALLY, WE WEREN'T RUNNING AWAY?,' REPLIED SASIA, IN ALL SERIOUSNESS.

- 'AND WHAT WERE YOU DOING?,' SAID PENROSE, GENUINELY AMUSED.

- 'WELL, WE'D JUST AGREED TO LEAVE THE PLANET WITH THIS CAPTIVE,' SHE REPLIED BLUNTLY.

- 'AND WHY?,' PEROSE CONTINUED TO PERSIST.

- 'BECAUSE WE FOUND TREACHERY IN COMMAND AND DECIDED TO DO OUR WARRIOR DUTY,' SASIA CALLED PASSIONATELY.

PENROSE BECAME COMPLETELY SERIOUS.

- YOU'RE JUST DESERTERS, MY GIRL, DON'T PUSH THESE CHEAP NUMBERS ON ME. TO AN OLD WOLF LIKE ME THEY'LL BE HARD TO PASS. I KNOW WHAT'S GOING ON OUT THERE RIGHT NOW. BUT YOU'RE RIGHT ABOUT THE BETRAYAL. THERE REALLY IS. BUT WE HAVEN'T UNCOVERED IT YET EITHER. IT SEEMS TO BE REALLY EXTENSIVE THOUGH.

- 'WHAT ARE YOU GOING TO DO WITH US?,' INQUIRED ENDWHITE.

- 'WE'RE NOT GOING TO KILL YOU, OR DUMP YOU MERCILESSLY INTO OPEN SPACE!,' SAID PENROSE SIMPLY. 'YOU DESERVE RESPECT, AT LEAST, FOR HIJACKING ONE OF THE MAIN SATELLITE SHIPS, AND ALSO FOR ACTING AS A TEAM. WE ARE ALSO TEETERING ON THE EDGE OF GALACTIC LAW. RICHWATER, OUR REAR ADMIRAL'S ADJUTANT, WAS ALSO ESCORTED BY US.'

KENJI PALED.

- 'THEN YOU SERVE ELMBAUM, DON'T YOU?,' HE ASKED, SLIGHTLY ANNOYED.

- I SERVE NO ONE, REAR ADMIRAL, OUR COLLEGE IS INDEPENDENT AND EXISTS OUTSIDE THE CHAIN OF COMMAND, BUT STILL HAS SOME TIES TO IT.

- 'IS HE STILL IN THE COLONY?,' INQUIRED KENJI.

- 'PROBABLY,' REPLIED PENROSE UNPERTURBED. 'I DIDN'T KNOW HE WAS YOUR ADJUTANT THEN. I FOUND OUT LATER.'

- 'WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?,' ASKED ENDWHITE.

- AS THINGS STAND, THERE IS NOTHING FOR US TO DO BUT GO TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT, WHICH IS BEYOND ALL LEGAL JURISDICTION. AT LEAST THERE WE WON'T BE TREATED AS TRAITORS AND DESERTERS. NOR WILL THEY HAVE THE COURAGE TO LOOK FOR US THERE.

THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT WAS OFFICIALLY OFF-LIMITS TO EXPLORATION AND INCLUDED STAR SYSTEMS OF UNKNOWN SPECIES. HOWEVER, THERE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE MANY PULSAR STARS THERE, OR WHAT ARE CALLED AMONG ASTROPHYSICISTS 'ZOMBIE STARS.'

- 'LET'S GO,' CALLED PENROSE. 'REVERSE COURSE.'

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: A NEW REALITY

ELMBAUM INTENDED TO HEAD RIGHT FOR THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT, WHERE IT WAS A LITTLE-KNOWN FACT THAT THERE WAS ALSO A PLANET WITH PERFECTLY SUITABLE CONDITIONS FOR LIFE. FEAR OF COSMIC RADIATION AND THE VAST, UNIMAGINABLE DISTANCE WOULD HAVE STOPPED ANY DAREDEVILS WHO MIGHT POSSIBLY HAVE SOUGHT TO HOLD HIM TO ACCOUNT FOR HIS OUTRAGES. GORDON KNEW HE HAD TECHNICALLY FAILED, BUT LIFE WAS MUCH KINDER. HE WASN'T GOING TO SACRIFICE HIMSELF FOR ANYTHING OR ANYONE. HE WASN'T AN IDEALIST; HE WAS A PRACTITIONER.

THE UNFAMILIAR QUADRANT APPEALED TO HIM, SINCE COLONY 206, TO BEGIN WITH, WAS NOT A VERY SUSTAINABLE SPACE SETTLEMENT. IT HAD BEEN ESTABLISHED TWENTY YEARS AGO.

THE RICHES HE HAD CAPTURED HE WOULD USE TO CREATE A CLOSED-LOOP ECONOMY BASED ON GAMBLING AND VARIOUS FORMS OF SPACE FARMING. HE KNEW THAT ACCORDING TO SOME RUMORS, FORMER DAREDEVILS AND PRISONERS HAD GONE THERE. THAT WAS WHERE HE AND HIS 'RETINUE' HAD TO GO, AND THEY HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO FOLLOW HIM. HE HAD TO DO HIS JOB CONSCIENTIOUSLY.

THE SPACE PLATFORM HAD DEPARTED, IT WOULD CARRY THE RICHES INTO FREE ORBIT, WHERE THEY WOULD BE OVERLOADED.

CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS HIS PARTNER, AND OFFICIALLY GENE PALEY.

THE ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE THREE SEEMED UNBREAKABLE, AS ELMBAUM STILL NEEDED THEM. HE HAD TO TREAD CAREFULLY.

THEY FLEW OUT EXACTLY AT THE APPOINTED TIME. GORDON TOOK ONE LAST LOOK AT THIS PLANET, WHICH IN THAT MOMENT OF SELF-FORGETFULNESS SEEMED TO HIM LIKE A BIG NOTHING. EASILY REPLACEABLE AND NOT ALL THAT VALUABLE.

LATER, HOWEVER, HE CLEARLY REALIZED THAT THEY HAD QUITE A WAY TO GO UNTIL THEY REACHED THEIR FINAL DESTINATION AFTER ALL.

HE ALSO REMEMBERED THE DECEPTION WITH GENERAL ZENGAL. 'THAT HOLOGRAM WAS MY IDEA. I EASILY FOOLED THEIR PILOT. I KNEW ALL OF ELIZANDRA'S PLANS. ALWAYS ACTING SO CONSPIRATORIAL, AND I WIN WITH MY RUSTIC METHODS. AS LONG AS THEY'RE BANGING THEIR HEADS OVER THE LABOR COLONY AND THEIR OWN SURVIVAL ON THIS PERISHING PLANET, I'LL JUST SURVIVE. ALL THAT'S LEFT IS TO NEUTRALIZE PALEY. HE'S THE ONLY ONE STILL BOTHERING ME. HIS EYES LOOK EVER SO PENETRATING.'

- 'THE PLATFORM HAS ALREADY DEPARTED, SIR,' A SOLDIER CALLED.

- 'EXCELLENT,' SAID ELMBAUM. 'NOW I WON'T BE DEALING WITH ANY MORE STUDENT PROTEST MOVEMENTS, POLITICAL ACTIVISTS, OR REFINERY WORKERS' STRIKES. I JUST GOT SICK OF THAT SHIT. TIME TO GET A LIFE, GORDON. YOU'RE GETTING ON IN YEARS.'

NATURALLY THOSE WORDS WERE NOT SPOKEN IN THE PRESENCE OF THE SOLDIER.

'THERE WILL BE NOTHING LEFT ON THIS PLANET BUT DUMBED-DOWN GUARRONS, A FEW ARCHANAEANS, AND THOUSANDS OF HUMAN BODIES BURIED BENEATH THE RUINS,' HE CONTINUED HIS OMINOUS TIRADE TO HIMSELF. AND SO IT MUST.

GENERAL ZENGAL WAS THE MOST HEADSTRONG AND ORIGINAL COUNTERINTELLIGENCE MEASURE THAT HAD OCCURRED TO HIM. ONE OF THE CHIEF FUNCTIONS OF COUNTER-INTELLIGENCE WAS TO IMPORT DISINFORMATION. AND THIS COMPUTER-GENERATED AND CLEVERLY USED SCREEN SUCCEEDED IN DECEIVING THE ENEMY'S MOVES.

SASIA HAD PASSED THE INFORMATION TO ELISANDRA, SHE TO SPEARS AND NAVARRO, BUT WITHOUT REVEALING HER SOURCE. THAT WORKED FOR A WHILE. AS TIME WENT ON, THE FUTURISTIC HOLOGRAPHIC ILLUSION BECAME HARDER AND HARDER TO MAINTAIN, BECAUSE IT HAD TO LOOK INSANELY REAL, OR PERHAPS AT LEAST SO REAL AS TO CONVINCE THE ENEMY THAT IT WAS ACTUALLY BRIGADIER GENERAL OLLIE ZENGAL, COMMANDER OF THE NINTH AIR COMPANY OUT OF EVIN DERR BASE, ABOUT A HUNDRED AND NINETY MILES WEST OF RODWELL. THEY HAD TO MAKE UP A STORY ABOUT HIM BEING A DOUBLE AGENT FOR THE ELOHYN FORCES AND ALSO THE UBUNDER FORCES. IT WAS TOO TIME CONSUMING BECAUSE THE WHOLE SCENARIO WAS BEING PROCESSED ON ADVANCED MODEL QUANTUM COMPUTERS.

THE WHOLE DEVELOPMENT WITH THE GENERAL TOOK MONTHS. MY COMPUTER SPECIALISTS CHANGED IT SO MUCH AND HE WAS JUST THE PERFECT RECRUITER FOR THE LIEUTENANT. SASIA COULD HAVE TILTED THE WAR BACK AT DIOMEDES BASE, BUT MY PLAN FOILED THEIR METHODS. ALL THAT WAS LEFT WAS FOR ENDUOCLES TO MAKE CONTACT WITH THE GUARRON CHIEFTAINS, WHO WERE STRONG AND POWERFUL. THIS PLANET WILL STILL REMAIN THEIRS, BUT I AM ALMOST THEIR DESCENDANT. I HAVE THEIR BLOOD IN MY VEINS. IF HE CONVINCES THEM, PERHAPS ONE DAY I WILL RETURN HERE WHEN

THE RADIATION HAS WORN OFF. I'VE BEEN ALIVE FOR OVER A THOUSAND YEARS NOW, SO I DON'T MUCH CARE. THAT LEGEND WITH MIDRIEL AND GIMPLIN ORN WORKED FOR SO MANY YEARS. BUT NOW IT'S TIME TO CHANGE TACTICS AT LEAST A TINY BIT. THE ARCHANEANS ONLY MATTER.

BUT SOMEONE DID HEAR HIS WORDS. AND IT WAS GENE PALEY. HE KNEW THAT THIS WHOLE COMPLICATED PUZZLE WAS ALREADY STARTING TO LINE UP GRADUALLY, AND IT WAS ONLY A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE EVERYTHING FELL INTO PLACE. HE HATED THE GOVERNOR FOR HIS BRUTAL CALLOUSNESS AND DESPOTISM. SHE SUSPECTED HIS SECRETS, BUT EVEN HE WAS A LITTLE SURPRISED. ALMOST FOR A MOMENT HE SAW THE WHOLE PICTURE.

'SO TO HIM WE ARE JUST SOME PAWNS THAT HE MOVES AROUND THE CHESSBOARD AS HE PLEASES.' HE THOUGHT ANGRILY. 'YOUR DAYS ARE NUMBERED, GOVERNOR!'

^^^

GORDON ELMBAUM WAS ENJOYING A LUXURY HE DESERVED, ONE HE COULDN'T EVEN AFFORD IN HIS NATIVE IMGRADON. HE WAS FED UP WITH THE PROTESTS OF SOME UNIONS - ETERNALLY DISSATISFIED WITH THE STATUS QUO HE HAD IMPOSED. HE HAD TO PRETEND, IF ONLY A LITTLE, BUT THE PAIN OF HIS MIXED BACKGROUND BURNED HIM FIERCELY. HE HAD NO CHOICE BUT TO CONSTANTLY RELIEVE IT, AND THE ARCHANEANS' FEATHERS WERE THE ONLY MEANS OF DOING SO. THERE WAS NO FOOLING HIMSELF, HE KNEW THEY WERE A LIMITED SUPPLY AND IF HE RAN OUT HE WOULD DIE IN HELLISH PAIN. HE WAS SURE THERE WAS A FATAL DEFECT SOMEWHERE IN HIS CHROMOSOME PAIRS AND NOTHING WOULD BE ABLE TO CURE HIM COMPLETELY. HE JUST NEEDED TO BE ABLE TO CONSTANTLY RELIEVE HIS ACHES AND PAINS.

CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS PARTICULARLY SENSITIVE TO HIS NEEDS IN VIEW OF THE FACT THAT THEY WERE NOW BUSINESS PARTNERS, AND



CHRIS KNEW THAT THE GOVERNOR WAS HIS ONLY CHANCE TO SHORE UP HIS MATERIAL POSITION. YES, HE WAS WEALTHY, BUT THAT WEALTH WAS AS UNSTABLE AS SOME GIANT'S FEET OF CLAY. FOR HIS PART, GORDON, FOR ALL HIS POWER, WAS DOOMED TO A KIND OF 'SOCIAL DEATH.' NOTHING WAS TO BE THE SAME. HE KNEW THAT RETRIBUTION AWAITED HIM, AND EVEN IF HE ESCAPED IT, HE WOULD FOREVER BE ON THORNS LEST SOMETHING FROM SOMEWHERE SHOULD STRIKE. WAS THIS THE CAREER HE HAD FOUGHT FOR. VERY DOUBTFUL.

GENE PALEY WAS ONE WHO WOULD HAVE GLADLY BROKEN AWAY FROM THAT TRIUMVIRATE, BUT THE CAREER OF A FORMER FAILED ADMIRAL WAS NOT A GOOD FRESH START. BESIDES, MOST PLACES ON THE PLANET HAD BEEN TOTALLY WRECKED BY THE PROLONGED ARTIFICIALLY INDUCED CATAclysms AND WARFARE. WHAT TO DO? GENE BORE A RESPONSIBILITY NO LESS THAN THAT OF THE GOVERNOR. HE HAD ORCHESTRATED THE POGROMS AT RODWELL AND DIOMEDES BASE IN LEARNIA. HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR TOO MANY BAD THINGS. HE WAS ALSO THE ORDERLY OF THAT TRAITOR WHOSE NAME HAD NOT YET BEEN REVEALED. HE WAS THE REAL PUNCHING BAG IN THE HANDS OF THE POWER-HUNGRY GOVERNOR. NOW HE HAD TO SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES.

THE SOCIAL LIFE OF THE RULERS IN THE DISTANT FUTURE WAS TOO FAR REMOVED FROM THAT OF THE PAST. THEIR CONFERENCES AND MEETINGS QUITE OFTEN INCLUDED READY-RECORDED HOLOGRAPHIC PRESS RELEASES, AND IT WAS ALL SO ARTIFICIAL THAT THERE WAS NOWHERE ELSE TO GO. THEY DIDN'T EVEN HAVE TO THINK, BUT THEY DID HAVE TO BE CAREFUL TO CONTROL THEIR MILITARY AND FINANCIAL RESOURCES. THE PEOPLE WERE A HERD TO BE MANAGED.

WHEN THEY SUCCESSFULLY LEFT THE PLANET ON THE SPECIAL VOLTAN-CLASS LONG-RANGE SPACE SHUTTLES, THEY INTERCEPTED THE TRANSPORT PLATFORM THAT WAS LAZILY 'FLOATING' IN THE VACUUM OF SPACE, COLLECTING ALL OF THE GOVERNOR'S VALUABLES. THEY DIDN'T FAIL TO SET OFF AN EXONIUM AUTO-

DETONATOR BOMB TO BE A PLEASANT SURPRISE TO ANYONE CURIOUS WHO HAPPENED TO DECIDE TO BOARD THE PLATFORM. IT WAS GORDON'S STYLE OF SAYING 'GOODBYE!'.

THE EXISTING METHOD OF TRACKING AIRCRAFT BY DETECTING TRACES OF THEIR BURNT FUEL COULD EASILY HAVE BEEN AVOIDED. THEY MADE A COURSE DEVIATION AND HEADED FOR THE NEAREST QUASAR, WHERE THEY WOULD PASS AT A LARGE AND SAFE ENOUGH DISTANCE TO AVOID BEING SUCKED IN BY THE BLACK HOLE AT THE CENTER OF THAT GALAXY. IT WAS A DANGEROUS AND LOGICAL UNDERTAKING. THEN THEY HAD TO MAKE A FEW COLLAPSAR JUMPS AND DEDUCT THE APPROPRIATE SUBJECTIVE TIME. AND THEN - IF THEY SURVIVED UNTIL THEN, THEY'D THINK OF IT.

ELMBAUM KNEW THAT THE VAST AMOUNT OF GALACTIC CREDITS GUARANTEED HIM RESPECT WHEREVER HE WENT, BECAUSE HE COULD PAY WITH HARD AND STABLE CURRENCY.

CHRIS ZONRETHIS WOULD ACT AS HIS FINANCIAL ASSISTANT, AS GORDON DIDN'T LIKE TO TOUCH DIRECTLY, AND NEEDED A MIDDLEMAN. AS MUCH AS HE HATED OTHER PEOPLE BEING PRIVY TO HIS SECRETS, HE COULDN'T DENY THAT HE COULDN'T AVOID WORKING WITH SOME OF THEM.

TO HIDE HIS WEALTH, WHICH NUMBERED IN THE QUASI-MILLIONS , HE NEEDED TO BUILD A SPECIFIC FINANCIAL PYRAMID, AND ZONRETHIS WOULD BE THE MAN TO RUN IT. THE INTERESTING MOMENT CAME JUST WHEN HE HAD TO TRANSFER HIS ASSETS. HE JUST WASN'T GOING TO DO IT. NOT EVEN B-CLASS WARSHIPS HAD BEEN TO WHERE THEY WERE GOING.

AFTER EXPERIENCING QUITE A FEW ADVENTURES, THEY FINALLY REACHED ONE OF THE LAST INTERMEDIATE DESTINATIONS BEFORE THEIR FINAL GOAL. THEY LANDED ON THE PLANET SEBUR NAG WITHOUT INCIDENT. THE LOCALS WERE EXTREMELY PEACEFUL AND NAIVE. THEY LOOKED LIKE HUMANOIDS WITH SLIGHTLY WEAKER BODIES THAN HUMANS. GORDON NEEDED AN INTERPRETER, BUT

THERE SIMPLY WASN'T ONE. ZEGANDARIAN SPEECH WAS NOT VERY COMMON IN THIS PART OF THE GALAXY.

GORDON WAS VERY DESPERATE, AS HIS RICHES WOULD NOT SERVE HIM ON A PLANET WITH SUCH A PRIMITIVE SYSTEM, WHERE ALL ECONOMIC LIFE WAS BASED ON BARTER.

THEY MANAGED TO GET SOME PROVISIONS AND ALSO FUEL FOR THE SHUTTLES IN EXCHANGE FOR VERY KIND WORDS AND GESTURES. BUT GORDON HAD TO PART WITH A RATHER LARGE AMOUNT OF ARCHANAY FEATHERS, WHOSE HEALING FUNCTIONS KEPT HIM ALIVE. THE LOCALS WERE VERY WILLING TO EXCHANGE HIS OWN ARCHANAEIDS, WHICH WERE PUT IN SPECIAL CAGES INSULATED WITH THE AFOREMENTIONED HYON FIBERS SO THAT THEIR SCREAMS COULD NOT BE HEARD.

GORDON SAW THAT IT WAS TOO RISKY TO STAY ON THIS PLANET. HE HAD NO IDEA WHERE THEY SHOULD GO NEXT, BECAUSE ALTHOUGH THE TIME JUMPS WERE RELATED TO THE SO-CALLED ZERO TIME, THEY ALSO HAD TO TAKE INTO ACCOUNT THE TECHNICAL CAPABILITIES OF THE SHUTTLES. THEY NEEDED A SHORT BREAK. SO THEY DECIDED TO STAY A LITTLE LONGER.

GORDON ATE AND DRANK ON HIS STOMACH. CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS DANCING WITH THE LOCALS, WHO WERE SHAKING THEIR BIG VIOLIN-LIKE HEADS STRANGELY. 'WHAT A STRANGE PLACE THE UNIVERSE WAS, APPARENTLY IT REALLY DOES HAVE EVERYTHING HERE!' THOUGHT GORDON.

SUDDENLY, GENE PALEY BURST INTO ONE OF THE EQUAZARIUM WARDS OF THE 'BUILDING' WHERE GORDON WAS HOUSED.

- 'GORDON, BELIEVE IT OR NOT, THEY'RE ON OUR HEELS, AND THEY'LL BE HERE SOON!,' SAID PALEY BREATHLESSLY. 'OF COURSE, HE WAS BLUFFING A BIT, NOT BECAUSE WHAT HE HAD SAID DIDN'T RING TRUE, BUT BECAUSE SOMEWHERE IN THERE, HE SECRETLY WANTED THE GOVERNOR TO GET WHAT HE DESERVED, BUT HIMSELF

TO GET AMNESTY FOR HIS TRANSGRESSIONS. THE COURT MARTIAL WOULD HAVE EXECUTED HIM OUTRIGHT FOR TREASON.'

THE CLIMATE OF SEBUR NAG WAS SOMETHING LIKE SUBTROPICAL AND THE PLANET WAS COVERED WITH FORESTS OF EXOTIC PLANTS CALLED EOPHYTES. THEY RESEMBLED TREES, BUT HAD AERIAL ROOTS, ALTHOUGH THE ATMOSPHERE OF SEBUR NAG WAS QUITE POOR IN OXYGEN. IT WAS KNOWN THAT THERE WAS NO OTHER INTELLIGENT LIFE BEYOND THE THREE OR FOUR POLYPS ON ITS SURFACE. NOR WERE THERE ANY LARGE ANIMALS. JUST MICROORGANISMS AND SMALL INSECTS TYPICAL OF EOPHYTIC FORESTS.

- COVER THE SHUTTLES DEEP INTO THE NORTHEAST OF THE PLANET. EVEN IF IT'S A FALSE ALARM, WE NEED TO BE SURE - GORDON SPOKE WITH UNRUFFLED CALM, BUT SOMEWHERE IN THERE PALEY GLIMPSED THE FIRST STIRRINGS OF UNCERTAINTY. THE GOVERNOR WASN'T USED TO BEING IN THE ROLE OF THE HUNTED, BUT LIKE A TRAINED PREDATOR HE STALKED HIS VICTIMS AND EXECUTED THEM MERCILESSLY.

SEVERAL DAYS PASSED. THE ANXIETY PROVED FALSE. BUT PALEY RECEIVED SOME PRAISE FOR HIS DILIGENCE. IT ALLOWED HIM TO GET A LITTLE CLOSER TO GOVERNOR ELMBAUM, WHOSE CONFIDENCE WAS BEGINNING TO CRACK. HE JUST NEEDED A LITTLE MORE PATIENCE.

THE GOVERNOR WOULD MAKE HIS FIRST MISTAKE SOONER OR LATER, AND FROM THEN ON IT WAS A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE HE ACHIEVED HIS GOALS.

^^^

THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT WAS AN INTERESTING PLACE. THE MOST CHEERFUL AND PLEASANT PEOPLE IN THE UNIVERSE WERE GATHERED HERE. ALL THE EX-CONVICTS AND ADVENTURERS WHO HAD MANAGED TO AVOID ENDING UP IN LABOR COLONY 206 SPENT

THEIR TIME EATING AND DRINKING. IT WAS QUITE ENJOYABLE. GAMBLING FLOURISHED IN ALL ITS FORMS. THERE WAS GAMBLING ON 'ENTOSU', 'MANTRIX' AND LAST BUT NOT LEAST ON 'ORIMO'. IT WAS SO INTERESTING. SOME OF THE BEST COSMIC POKER MASTERS WERE THERE. EVERY LAST ONE OF THEM POLITICAL PRISONERS. THERE WERE NO CRIMINAL ELEMENTS 'MUDDYING THE WATERS' IN THE QUADRANT. WHEN THEY WERE IN THE RIGHT PLACE, THEY SET OUT ON THEIR BRAND NEW LIFE PATH. THERE WAS DEFINITELY A LOT OF WORK TO BE DONE HERE, BUT THERE WAS PLENTY OF FOOD. THEY WERE DEVELOPING SPACE FARMING ON A VERY FRIENDLY BASIS ON THE PLANET 'ZENTICA 12 54', WHICH WAS NOT MARKED ON ANY STAR CHARTS. FOR THIS REASON, NO ONE BOTHERED THEM WITH MISCELLANEOUS SUGGESTIONS.

THE SOCIAL ORDER WAS MORE THAN GOOD, AS MORE THAN SIX THOUSAND PEOPLE RESIDED HERE PERMANENTLY. AND TO BE DECLARED SUSTAINABLE BY SPACE STANDARDS, A COLONY HAD TO BE AT LEAST TOWARDS FOUR THOUSAND PERMANENT RESIDENTS. THEY HAD 'EMIGRATED' BUT THEY HAD BROUGHT NEW VALUES TO THE NEW PLACE. THEY HAD ALSO BROUGHT THEIR WORLDVIEW.

APART FROM ELENDOANS AND GORENAI CHIRAS, THERE WERE MANY OTHER CROPS BEING GROWN, INCLUDING SOME THAT THEY HAD CULTIVATED THEMSELVES. FOR EXAMPLE, THEY WERE VERY FOND OF GROWING THE EMSATAN TREE, WHICH PRODUCED STRANGE BUT VERY TASTY FRUITS. THEY HAD MADE A SMALL RESIDENTIAL COLONY OUT OF THE SAME XENTARI THEY HAD AT LABOR COLONY 206. BUT THERE WAS ONE SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE. THERE WAS A REAL CAMARADERIE HERE. THERE WAS NO BETRAYAL. THERE WERE NO BACK THOUGHTS. THIS WAS HEAVEN FOR THEM. HERE TIME WAS TRULY STOPPED. AND NO ONE CARED HOW LONG THEY HAD TO STAY HERE. NO ONE WAS IN A HURRY TO GET ANYWHERE.

THE FUGITIVES HAD MANAGED TO AVOID THOSE TAWDRY LAWSUITS THAT PINDOR AND THE OTHER INTELLECTUALS HAD FALLEN PREY TO. HERE THEY LIVED BY THEIR OWN LAWS. AND IT COULD BE SAID THAT THEY LIVED WELL. AT LEAST FOR THE TIME BEING. OF COURSE,

THOUGH VERY RARELY, THEY HAD CONCERNS THAT SOMETHING BAD MIGHT DROP ON THEIR HEADS OUT OF THE BLUE. BUT FOR NOW, THEY WERE CALM.

GORDON ELMBAUM WAS GOING TO A NOT ENTIRELY APPROPRIATE PLACE IN VIEW OF THE FACT THAT HE INTENDED TO ENFORCE HIS OWN LAWS UPON THEM. NO THAT WAS NOT GOING TO HAPPEN FOR CERTAIN. HE JUST HADN'T HIT THE RIGHT SPOT.

SO FROM THREE PLACES AT ONCE, THREE GROUPS OF ADVENTURERS WANTED TO IMPOSE THEIR VALUES ON THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. THE QUESTION WAS WHO WOULD ARRIVE FIRST.

TIME, AS WE KNOW, IS A RELATIVE CONCEPT. BUT HERE, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE COLONISTS' FIRST-BORN CHILDREN COULD BREATHE 'FREE' AIR, WHICH, THOUGH FED THROUGH COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLES, WAS MUCH MORE PLEASANT THAN THE STIFLING ATMOSPHERE OF ZEGANDARIA.

ANY ATTEMPT TO QUELL THE REBELLION COULD HAVE MEANT THE END OF THIS PARADISE. SO FLEETING. CREATED FROM THE ONE NOTHING. IT WAS THE ONE PLACE OF JOY CREATED BY THE UTTER TIMELESSNESS OR COMPLETE LACK OF IDEA OF WHAT WAS HAPPENING DURING THAT TIME.

THE CONCEPT OF A TRIAL DIDN'T EXIST HERE BECAUSE THE WORD 'CRIME' DIDN'T EITHER.

GORDON WAS STILL ON SEBUR NAG, BUT NOT FOR LONG. CHRIS ZONRETHIS HAD ALREADY STARTED WITH THE PLANS TO BUILD THEIR SPACE DOMINANCE. THAT WAS MORE THAN CERTAIN. THEY WEREN'T GOING TO LET IT FAIL DUE TO ELEMENTARY CARELESSNESS.

ZONRETHIS' FINANCIAL PYRAMID WAS BUILT ON MORE THAN A FLAT IDEA. THEY WERE GOING TO SELL A SORT OF 'SPACE INDULGENCE' TO ANYONE WILLING AND READY TO GO BACK TO THEIR HOME PLANET. THEY RELIED ON THE IGNORANCE OF THE COLONISTS, WHO HAD NO IDEA WHAT WAS GOING ON ELSEWHERE IN THE GALAXY. BUT

FOR THERE TO BE AT LEAST ONE SUBLIMINAL MOMENT, THERE HAD TO BE A SURPRISE. FOR THOSE WHO WON, THEY HAD PREPARED A FULL PARDON.

NATURALLY ONE WOULD HAVE JUST WONDERED IF THIS WASN'T SOME KIND OF NONSENSE, GIVEN THAT THEY WERE FINE AND WHERE THEY WERE AT THE MOMENT, BUT IT WASN'T. THE PLANET ZENTICA 12 54 WAS EXTREMELY SMALL, AND THAT WAS GOING TO CAUSE OVERPOPULATION PROBLEMS SOON ENOUGH. THE MAIN REASON WAS THE FACT THAT VERY FEW OF THE PLACES WERE HABITABLE.

THE GOVERNOR WAS READY TO PLAY HIS PART PROPERLY, AS BEFITTED A MAN OF HIS RANK. DISSLAN MIGHT BE CAPABLE OF FIXING ALL SORTS OF PROBLEMS ON THE SHUTTLES, BUT PROBLEMS LIKE THESE WERE THE SOLE PURVIEW OF GORDON ELMBAUM.

THE GOVERNOR WAS ALSO HIDING WHERE HE WOULD LEAVE HIS HEALING FEATHERS, LIKE AN INDIAN CHIEF UNWILLING TO PART WITH THE HALO OF HIS GLORY. HE WAS TO BE NOT JUST A MENTOR TO ZONRETHIS, BUT HIS EQUAL BUSINESS PARTNER. THAT WAS THE KEY TO SUCCESS.

A LITTLE LATER, HOWEVER, SOMETHING EXTREMELY UNFORESEEN HAPPENED.

THE AUTHORITIES OF SEBUR NAG TOLD THEM THAT BEFORE THEY COULD PROCEED, THEY WERE SUBJECT TO A THOROUGH BACKGROUND CHECK THAT WOULD DECIDE WHETHER THEY SHOULD GO TO JAIL. GORDON WAS ASTONISHED, BUT KEPT HIS MOUTH SHUT ANYWAY. THE FORMALITIES DRAGGED ON FOR FAR TOO LONG. THERE WAS NOTHING TO BE DONE. HE AND ZONRETIS WERE IN A SITUATION FROM WHICH THERE WAS NO MOVING.

FORTUNATELY, THEY WERE INFORMED THAT THEY HAD FOUND NOTHING AMISS AND COULD CONTINUE ON THEIR SPACE JOURNEY, MUCH TO GORDON'S EXTREME RELIEF.

SEBUR NAG WAS IN QUADRANT 175, WHICH MEANT THAT, DEDUCTING THE RELEVANT SUBJECTIVE TIME, THEY COULD REACH

THE CHERISHED QUADRANT 426 AFTER TOO MUCH LONGER. MORE THAN GORDON WOULD HAVE LIKED.

HE KNEW THAT TWO OF THE SHUTTLES WERE INTACT AND COULD BE USED TO HUNT HIM DOWN, BUT HE HAD TO RESIGN HIMSELF. HE WAS COUNTING ON HIS BRIBES AND HIS INNATE CHARM AS A POLITICAL ORATOR TO GET SUPPORT IN EVERY PLACE HE WENT.

THEY DECIDED TO MAKE A SMALL CHANGE IN THE PLAN. INSTEAD OF JUMPING FROM QUADRANT TO QUADRANT, THEY COULD MANEUVER TO CONFUSE AND MISLEAD THE OPPONENT.

THE CLAIM THAT 'WARP DRIVE' WAS ENOUGH TO GET AWAY FROM THEIR PURSUERS SIMPLY WASN'T TRUE. BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING THAT WAS DEFINITELY RELEVANT. AND THAT WAS THE ABILITY TO HIDE IN THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE RIGHT TIME.

GORDON KNEW THERE WAS A SPECIAL AREA OF ANTIMATTER. IT WAS WELL KNOWN FROM PHYSICS THAT MATTER AND ANTIMATTER SHOULDN'T EXIST, AS THEY WOULD DESTROY EACH OTHER ON CONTACT. NOT WHERE GORDON WAS GOING. THE PLACE, CALLED AN ANTIMATTER HIDEOUT, WAS A LITTLE-KNOWN SERVICE USUALLY PROVIDED TO ULTRA-RICH CROOKS AND CRIMINALS WHO NEEDED TO AVOID THE BLOWS OF THE LAW. AN ENTIRE PARALLEL UNIVERSE MADE OF ANTIMATTER. THEY DECIDED TO HIDE IN A SPECIAL VACUUM CHAMBER THAT COULD MOVE WITHOUT COMING INTO CONTACT WITH THIS ANTIMATTER AND DISRUPTING ITS INTEGRITY.

AFTER SEBUR, THE NAGS VISITED THE PLANET OSONIA, WHICH WAS FAMOUS FOR ITS TRADE IN JUST SUCH VACUUM CHAMBERS. DIFFERENT PLANETS AROUND THE GALAXY HAD COMPLETELY DIFFERENT LEVELS OF DEVELOPMENT, AND FOR THE FIRST TIME GORDON WAS GETTING TO KNOW ITS TRUE APPEARANCE. IT WAS ASTOUNDING HOW LITTLE HE ACTUALLY KNEW. APPARENTLY, HE WAS TOO LIMITED AND SELFISH A MAN. AND APPARENTLY HE CONSIDERED HIMSELF MASTER OF THE UNIVERSE WHILE RULING SOME LITTLE PLANET LIKE ZEGANDARIA. SO THEY HADN'T EVEN HEARD OF HIM HERE!



WHEN THEY SOLD HIM THE CHAMBER, THEY WARNED HIM THAT IT WASN'T VERY APPROPRIATE FOR THEM TO STAY IN IT FOR TOO LONG, BECAUSE ITS ISOLATION MIGHT STILL SUCCUMB. THEN THEIR DOOM WAS INEVITABLE. BUT THEY HAD TO TAKE SOMETHING ELSE INTO ACCOUNT AS WELL. THEY WEREN'T GOING TO BE ABLE TO GO BACK JUST LIKE THAT.

CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS QUITE REMORSEFUL BECAUSE THEY COULDN'T TAKE THE TREASURES WITH THEM.

- 'WE'LL HIDE THEM ON OSONIA,' ELMBAUM SPOKE SIMPLY, 'AT LEAST FOR A WHILE, UNTIL THEY FORGET ABOUT US. BUT NOT TOO LONG THOUGH.

'THE GREAT ELMBAUM WILL BE HIDDEN IN A MOST ORDINARY POT, LEST THEY COOK IT! WHAT AN OXYMORON!,' THOUGHT ZONRETHIS JOKINGLY, BUT HE DIDN'T VOICE HIS HUMOR, FOR GORDON MIGHT NOT HAVE UNDERSTOOD.

- 'NATURALLY WE'LL STAY THERE AS LONG AS IT TAKES. THAT'S CLEAR!,' SAID ZONRETHIS QUITE SIMPLY. - 'WE MUST DO OUR BEST AND NOT DESPAIR.'

THE TREASURES WERE TRANSPORTED TO ONE OF THE MANY CAVES OF OSONIA IN ORDER TO AVOID ANY POTENTIAL PROBLEMS. THERE WERE ALSO MERCENARIES THERE TO GUARD THEM. THEY WOULD RETURN THERE WHEN THEY COULD. IF THEY RETURNED AT ALL.

GORDON TOOK ONLY A SMALL AMOUNT OF ARCHANIAN FEATHERS WITH HIM, WHICH HE HID IN A SPECIAL COMPARTMENT OF HIS SUIT. HE MADE SURE ZONRETHIS DIDN'T SEE IT. THAT WOULD HAVE BROUGHT OUT HIS WEAKNESS.

^^^

A UNIVERSE MADE OF ANTIMATTER WAS SOMETHING POORLY UNDERSTOOD EVEN BY PHYSICISTS OF THE FUTURE. IT WASN'T THAT

MANY BRAINS HADN'T STUDIED THOUSANDS OF FORMULAS TO PROVE ITS EXISTENCE, BUT NO ONE HAD GONE SO FAR AS TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH EXPEDITION AND VERIFY EVERYTHING IN PRACTICE. NOW GORDON WAS GOING TO APPEAR IN THE ROLE OF UNWITTING EXPERIMENTAL RAT.

HE AND ZONRETHIS SLIPPED INTO THE CHAMBER AND THEIR ASSISTANTS SEALED IT. THEN A SPECIAL LAUNCHING DEVICE TOOK THEM ONTO THEIR SHIP, WHICH WOULD TRANSPORT IT TO A CERTAIN POINT FROM WHICH THE LAUNCH INTO THE FREE VACUUM OF SPACE WOULD TAKE PLACE.

BOTH FEARED THEY MIGHT NEVER RETURN, BUT SOME REASSURED THEM THAT THIS WAS THE ONLY POSSIBLE WAY OUT. THEY WERE STILL BEING CHASED AND HAD TO SAVE THEIR LIVES.

AFTER THE SUCCESSFUL LAUNCH OF THE VACUUM CHAMBER, WHICH, FOR AN ADDITIONAL COST, WAS REINFORCED WITH SPECIAL LAYERS OF ALLOY, THEY BEGAN TO FLOAT THROUGH THE NOTHINGNESS OF THE VACUUM OF SPACE.

THEY WERE WEARING IZENTIA SPACESUITS, MANUFACTURED ONLY ON THE PLANET OSONIA, FOR ENTHUSIASTS WHO WISHED TO MAKE LONG-DISTANCE SPACE JOURNEYS.

THEY KNEW THAT TIME IN THIS ANTIVERSE WENT BACKWARDS, AND IF THEY STAYED LONG ENOUGH, THEY MIGHT EVEN REJUVENATE.

OF COURSE, LEAVING THE CONFINES OF THE CURRENT UNIVERSE WAS NOT SUCH A SIMPLE AND ELEMENTARY MATTER, NAMELY, AN ENGINE WITH ENOUGH ACCELERATION WAS NEEDED TO BRIDGE THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN THE TWO UNIVERSES. SUCH AN ANTIMATTER ENGINE WAS UNDER DEVELOPMENT ON THE PLANET OSONIA, BUT EVERYONE UNANIMOUSLY AGREED THAT GORDON AND ZONRETHIS WERE SUITABLE EXPERIMENTAL MICE. THE NECESSARY KNOWLEDGE WAS IMPLANTED IN THEIR BRAINS IN NEGATIVE TIME. BUT THEIR BODIES HAD TO SPEND A FEW WEEKS IN A SPECIAL SIMULATOR,

WHERE THEY COULD CATCH UP ON THE YEARS OF PHYSICAL TRAINING THEY HAD APPARENTLY MISSED.

REACH FIRST SPACE SPEED, REACH SECOND SPACE SPEED, REACH THIRD SPACE SPEED, THEY HEARD IN THE TRANSMITTER.

ELMBAUM HAD WORRIED TOO MUCH BECAUSE ACCELERATION WAS A PROBLEM. THEY HAD ENOUGH INITIAL THRUST AT LAUNCH, BUT NOW A TECHNICAL MALFUNCTION COULD OCCUR.

BUT EVERYTHING WENT SMOOTHLY AFTERWARDS - TEXTBOOK. TOO MANY DIFFERENT OPINIONS HAD BEEN EXPRESSED AS TO THEIR ACTUAL SURVIVABILITY. A TEAM OF SCIENTISTS HAD INSTRUCTED THEM TO TAKE SPECIAL NOTES, AS MANY THINGS COULD GO WRONG. SPECIAL EQUIPMENT RECORDED THE RESULTS OF THE FLIGHT.

ELMBAUM HAD BEGUN TO REALIZE THAT IT WASN'T MONEY THAT WOULD BE ABLE TO SAVE HIM, BUT THE KNOWLEDGE OF WHAT TO DO NEXT. WHILE THESE COWARDS WERE JUMPING FROM QUADRANT TO QUADRANT, WHICH EVEN WITH SUBJECTIVE TIME DEDUCTED COULD TAKE HUNDREDS OF YEARS, GORDON HAD CHOSEN THE SMARTER MOVE. THINGS WOULD FALL INTO PLACE LATER, OR SO THE GOVERNOR HOPED.

BUT SOMEWHERE IN THE PLAN THUS CONSTRUCTED SOMETHING WAS DEFINITELY LIMPING, AND LIMPING BADLY. THEY COULDN'T JUST STAY IN THE NEW PLACE. THEY HAD LIMITED SUPPLIES OF FOOD AND WATER. EVERYTHING HAD TO BE CALCULATED. THEY WERE GOING TO STAY, HOWEVER, FOR A SHORT TIME. THE ANTIMATTER ENGINE MIGHT FAIL ON THEIR EVENTUAL RETURN AND THEN THEY WOULD BE IRRETRIEVABLY LOST. AND THIS TIME, NO ONE WOULD SAVE THEM.

PASSING INTO THE NEW REALITY, THEY SENSED SOMETHING STRANGE. THE TIME FLOWING BACK WAS HARD TO DESCRIBE, BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE IN THERE SOMEWHERE. THEIR MEMORIES SLOWLY BEGAN TO FADE, AS IF THEY HADN'T LIVED THEIR PREVIOUS LIVES. THEY HAD TO STRUGGLE TO REMEMBER. IT WAS TOO MANY PROBLEMS THAT HAD ACCUMULATED OVER THE YEARS,

TOO MANY UNREDEEMED SINS. WHY EXACTLY WERE THEY GOING TO BE 'CLEANSED' NOW? WHAT HAD CHANGED AFTER ALL? NO ONE ANYWHERE HAD TOLD THEM THAT THE RECOVERY OF MEMORIES THEY WERE SO PROUD OF WOULD NOT HELP THEM IN THE NEW PLACE.

SOME OF THE FINANCIAL MACHINATIONS HE HAD CARRIED OUT UNDER GORDON'S PRESSURE, CRUELLY DEPRIVING THE REFINERY WORKERS OF THEIR WAGES, FLASHED THROUGH CHRIS'S MIND. ANOTHER MEMORY ALSO 'STUNG' HIM ALMOST IN THE FACE, NAMELY THE MISUSE OF KEVLARITE IN THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE SPACEPORT. NOT TO BE OVERLOOKED WERE SOME CROOKED DEALS WITH UNION LEADERS THAT GORDON HAD BOUGHT THROUGH HIS AGENCY. THESE MEMORIES WERE LIKE SO MANY BRIGHT SPOTS BOMBARDING THEIR MINDS.

GORDON AND ZONRETHIS CONTINUED TO STAY QUIET AND PEACEFUL IN THEIR CELL. SHE KEPT DRIFTING OFF TO WHO KNEW WHERE. BUT SOMEWHERE IN THERE SOMETHING FLICKERED. THE TWO FIXED THEIR EYES ON THE ENDLESS DARKNESS. IT WASN'T A SPACESHIP. IT WASN'T ASTEROID DEBRIS OR ANYTHING, BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING STRANGE ABOUT THAT LIGHT. THEN THEY HEARD THE VOICE! IT WAS THE REAL VOICE NOW! NOT THE ONE THAT HAD BEEN JACOB WALLACE'S, GUIDING HIS SONS AND MARK'S LITTLE BAND OF ADVENTURERS. THIS VOICE WAS OF A HIGHER ORDER. THIS WAS THE UNIVERSAL VOICE!

- GORDON HAD NOWHERE TO HIDE! THE CRIMES HE COMMITTED CAUSED GREAT IMBALANCE THROUGHOUT THE UNIVERSE. WHY ARE YOU TRYING TO ESCAPE YOUR FATE? AND HOW FAR DO YOU THINK YOU'LL GET BY DOING EVIL TO OTHERS!

HE AND CHRIS BOTH HEARD THE WORDS CLEARLY. THE CAPSULE WAS DEADLY QUIET.

- 'YOU ARE TRYING TO ESCAPE HUMAN JUSTICE. BUT YOU CAN'T ESCAPE GOD'S!,' THE VOICE THREATENED HIM.

GORDON WASN'T RELIGIOUS, HE WAS EVEN LESS RELIGIOUS THAN AN ATHEIST OUGHT TO BE. BUT THIS TIME HE WAS STARTLED. TERRIFIED FROM THE BOTTOM OF HIS SOUL!

- ACTUALLY, GORDON, YOU ARE BEING GIVEN THE RARE CHANCE TO FIX ALL THE MESSSES YOU CREATED AND ATONE FOR YOUR GUILT IN FRONT OF EVERYONE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME? JUST BECAUSE TIME HAS STARTED TO RUN BACKWARDS DOESN'T MEAN YOU'RE INNOCENT AT ALL, DOES IT? BUT IF YOU REPENT, THEN MAYBE YOU'LL BE FORGIVEN. MAYBE!

GORDON LISTENED INTENTLY WITHOUT EVEN A GRUNT. IN FACT, HE DIDN'T EVEN DARE TO BREATHE.

- THEY'RE LOOKING FOR YOU, GORDON, IT'S TRUE THAT THEY'LL DEFINITELY NEVER FIND YOU HERE, BUT YOU HAVE TO DECIDE WHETHER YOU'RE A MAN OF DIGNITY WHO FACES UP TO DIFFICULTIES AND SOLVES THEM, OR WHETHER YOU'RE JUST A SOFTIE RUNNING FROM FAIR JUSTICE.

GORDON WASN'T USED TO BEING TALKED TO LIKE THIS. TO BE FAIR, IT WAS THE FIRST TIME IT HAD HAPPENED. AT FIRST, HE WAS TERRIBLY ANGRY. HE WAS GOVERNOR ELMBAUM. THE OMNIPOTENT AND OMNIBENEVOLENT OMNIPOTENT OVERLORD OF HALF OF ZEGANDARIA. EVEN IN ANOTHER UNIVERSE, THAT FACT WAS A FACT!

- STOP YOUR STUBBORNNESS, GORDON, AND LOOK AT THE FACTS. IF I DAMAGED YOUR ANTIMATTER ENGINE, YOU WOULD NEVER SUCCESSFULLY RETURN TO WHERE YOU SHOULD BE. TIME GOING BACKWARDS MEANS THAT YOU WILL BE REJUVENATED UNTIL YOU BECOME BABIES...

- 'AND THEN?,' ASKED ZONRETHIS IN HORROR.

- 'AND THEN YOU JUST DISAPPEAR!,' THE VOICE CALMLY ANSWERED THEM.

- 'I WANT TO SAVE YOU PRECISELY BECAUSE YOU ARE SO SINFUL AND HAVE SO MUCH TO ATONE FOR. A SPECIAL MISSION FALLS TO YOU. IF

YOU, GORDON, DO AS YOU ARE TOLD, I WILL CURE YOUR AFFLICTION, WHICH YOU HAVE CREATED IN YOUR QUEST TO LIVE FOREVER. 'AS YOU CAN SEE, YOU LOSE ABSOLUTELY NOTHING,' THE VOICE INSISTED.

- 'IT'S VERY EASY FOR YOU,' GORDON TRIED TO KEEP HIS COMPOSURE. 'I'M HAUNTED IN SO MANY PLACES. I'VE HAD TO SURVIVE, AND IT'S SO HARD TO KEEP THE BALANCE ALL THIS TIME.'

- I UNDERSTAND YOU, GORDON, BUT YOUR SURVIVAL SHOULDN'T COME AT THE EXPENSE OF THE SURVIVAL OF SO MANY OTHER BEINGS ACROSS THE GALAXY. TOO MANY HAVE DIED BECAUSE OF YOUR PRIDE AND STUBBORNNESS. I WOULD GO SO FAR AS TO SAY THAT YOU HAVE LONG SINCE CROSSED EVERY POSSIBLE LINE.

- 'THEN WHY ARE YOU WILLING TO DO SOMETHING SO GREAT FOR ME?,' HE ASKED QUITE SINCERELY.

- 'BECAUSE OF YOUR MOTHER,' SAID THE VOICE, SLIGHTLY TOUCHED.

- 'WHAT'S ALL THIS GOT TO DO WITH IT?,' ALMOST SHOUTED GORDON. 'HE WAS GETTING CONFUSED NOW, AND NOT IN A JOKING WAY.'

- 'YOUR MOTHER IS ACTUALLY BECKY MORINGALE,' PRONOUNCED THE VOICE MOST CALMLY.

HARDLY ANYTHING WOULD HAVE MADE A GREATER IMPRESSION ON GORDON THAN WHAT HE HEARD. HE COULD HAVE BEEN CHASED BY ARCH-NAYSAYERS, EVEN BY ALL SORTS OF CRIMINALS AND ADVENTURERS. ANY NUMBER OF PEOPLE COULD HAVE BEEN CHASING HIM, BUT SUCH A CLAIM DIDN'T JUST DEMEAN HIM, IT CALLED HIS EXISTENCE INTO QUESTION.

- 'EXPLAIN IT TO ME!,' HE GROUND OUT THROUGH HIS TEETH.

- THERE IS NOTHING SIMPLER THAN THAT. THE MOMENT THE WATCHERS OF THE PLANET SOARED INTO THE SKY, THE MOMENT

PAUL SAW THE FACE OF THAT FLIRTATIOUS WOMAN. IT WAS ALL THE MOMENT OF YOUR CONCEPTION AS A UNIVERSAL BEING!

- 'PLEASE?', GORDON ALREADY FELT LIKE HE WAS GOING MAD.

- IT'S JUST THAT THE VOICES IN THE UNIVERSE ARE OF A DIFFERENT ORDER, DEAR GOVERNOR. THE WATCHERS ARCHANAANS, BEING THE MOST ANCIENT RACE, HAVE SPECIAL SENSES. THEY WERE APPOINTED BY THE HIGH COUNCIL OF VOICES TO MONITOR WHAT HAPPENS ON ZEGANDARIA. AND I AM THE SO-CALLED UNIVERSAL VOICE. BECKY WENT IN WITH THE CRAZIES YOU KICKED OUT BECAUSE YOU THOUGHT THEY WERE EXPENDABLE AND TOOK AWAY THEIR RIGHT TO LIFE. TO A NORMAL AND HAPPY LIFE. YOU DYKED THEM QUITE UNDESERVEDLY, JUST BECAUSE THEY DIDN'T FIT YOUR IDEA OF THE PERFECT CITY-STATE. THEY WERE THE DISSENTERS WHO WERE SIMPLY INCONVENIENT. WHAT PAUL SAW WAS JUST PART OF THE PICTURE. THEY HAD ALREADY FOUND JACOB WALLACE, WHO I WHISPERED ALL SORTS OF THINGS TO AND HELPED GIVE GUIDANCE TO ALL THOSE WHO WANTED TO CHANGE THINGS FOR THE BETTER.

- 'BUT, WAIT A MINUTE, THEY'RE NOT COMPLETELY INNOCENT EITHER. THEY ALSO FOUGHT WARS AND ARE ALSO RESPONSIBLE FOR MANY DEATHS,' GORDON APOLOGIZES, NOT SO MUCH OUT OF MEANNESS AS NUMBNESS. THE VOICE SEEMED TO HAVE BEWITCHED HIM.

- GORDON, THE ISSUE HERE IS NOT ONE OF RESPONSIBILITY, BUT OF REMORSE. STOP WITH YOUR BUREAUCRATIC TERMS. EVEN IF UNINTENTIONALLY, BECKY MORINGALE HAS BECOME YOUR SPIRITUAL GUARDIAN MOTHER, EVEN THOUGH SHE HATES YOU AND SEES THAT YOU HAVE TURNED THE PLANET INTO A DUMP. THAT'S THE CORRELATION BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL. YOU SHOULD THANK HER, AS HER MERCY AND COMPASSION FOR A NOBLE CAUSE, THOUGH INSIGNIFICANT AT FIRST GLANCE, SAVES YOU IN MY EYES. OTHERWISE THERE WOULD BE NO FORGIVENESS FOR THEE.

- 'WHAT IF I JUST HYPOCRITICALLY AGREE? THEN WHAT WOULD HAPPEN?,' ASKED GORDON.

- 'THAT WOULD BE AT YOUR EXPENSE TOO! THE CONTRITION MUST BE SINCERE. 'THAT'S ALL YOU HAVE TO DO,' WHISPERED THE VOICE.

- 'VERY WELL, I REPENT,' PRONOUNCED GORDON, NOT VERY CONFIDENTLY.

- 'AH, NOT LIKE THAT,' THE VOICE CONTINUED TO SPEAK CALMLY TO HIM. 'SINCERE MEANS THAT BOTH YOU AND CHRIS WILL START HELPING THOSE YOU HAVE BEEN PERSECUTING AND DESTROYING WITH YOUR BUREAUCRATIC THINKING. THEN YOU, GORDON, WILL BE A HERO IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD. AND YOU WILL BE CURED OF YOUR INSIDIOUS DISEASE.'

GORDON BOWED HIS HEAD AND WEPT. HE WAS SINCERE. HE COULD SEE THERE WAS NO WAY OUT. THE SHAME WAS BORN OF THE MAGNITUDE OF HIS SINS. IT WAS TOO TERRIBLE. CHRIS COULD SEE THAT THE GLASS OF THE WHOLE SUIT HAD BECOME SWEATY AND HE COULD HARDLY SEE THE GOVERNOR'S FACE. THEN FOR THE FIRST TIME HE REALIZED THAT MAYBE HE HADN'T GOTTEN ENOUGH LOVE AS A CHILD. OTHERWISE MAYBE HE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN SO CRUEL TO EVERYONE AROUND HIM!

^^^

SPENDING TIME IN THE NEW REALITY, WHICH COULD BE CALLED BY THE TERM ANTI-TIME, HAD AFFECTED BOTH OF THEM IN A SPECIAL WAY. THEY CAME BACK FROM THAT ANTI-UNIVERSE CHANGED. IT WAS AS IF THEY HAD SLEPT A LONG AND DEEP SLEEP AND HAD SUDDENLY AWAKENED. CHRIS, WHO WAS THE FINANCIAL BRAINS, REALIZED THAT GORDON HAD TO DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH HIS MONEY. HE COULD HELP A LOT IF HE WANTED TO. HE WAS ALREADY AWARE OF THE GOVERNOR'S SHAMEFUL SECRET AND THE MIXED BACKGROUND HE WAS TRYING TO HIDE.

THE VOICE HAD KEPT HIS PROMISE. HE HADN'T DAMAGED THE ANTIMATTER ENGINE AND THEY HAD RETURNED WITHOUT INCIDENT. THAT WAS THE GOOD NEWS.



THE GOVERNOR WAS UTTERLY CHANGED. HE DECIDED TO RETURN TO OSONIA FIRST. HE WAS SAFE THERE. HIS MONEY WAS THERE, TOO. IT WAS NOT SO SAFE ON SEBUR NAG, BECAUSE THEY COULD FIND HIM THERE MUCH MORE EASILY THAN BEFORE. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE WAS ALSO THE FACT THAT SO MUCH HAD CHANGED WHILE THEY WERE GONE TO CONSIDER. THE TRANSITION FROM UNIVERSE TO ANTIVERSE HAD BEEN MADE FOR THE FIRST TIME. MANY SCIENTISTS WOULD HAVE WRITTEN TOO MUCH ON THE SUBJECT. GORDON WOULD HAVE CONTRIBUTED TO THAT AS WELL. NOW HE WOULD BE A CELEBRITY AGAIN. BUT UNINTENTIONALLY. HE HAD VOWED TO HELP OTHERS. THAT WOULD HENCEFORTH BE THE MEANING OF HIS LIFE. HE'D JUST GONE DOWN A BAD PATH. BUT HE COULD FIX HIMSELF. HE COULD CHANGE HIS LIFE. HE COULD AND HE HAD TO. HE'D BEEN THROUGH SO MUCH, AND ONLY NOW WAS HE REALIZING THAT TRUE SALVATION WAS JUST WITHIN REACH. ALL HE WANTED WAS CONTRITION.

THE GOVERNOR STOPPED IN ONE OF OSONIA'S LARGEST SETTLEMENTS. THERE WERE AS MANY AS SIX SPACE COLONIES ON THIS PLANET WITH THE STATUS OF POLIS. IN THE LARGEST OF THEM, OZIN TUN, HE MADE A SORT OF MEMORIAL TO THE VICTIMS. THE LOCALS LOOKED AT HIM AND WONDERED IF HE WAS CRAZY TO GIVE SO MUCH MONEY. THEY THOUGHT IT WAS KURTOASIA, BUT IT WASN'T. GORDON WAS DOING IT BECAUSE HE WANTED TO.

ON AN ALTAR MADE OF THE PUREST OBSIDIAN HE LAID ELURIAN SKINS, WHICH HE LIBERALLY POURED WITH BLOOD. THIS WAS IN THE OLD GUARRON TRADITION, AND THE HIDDEN MEANING WAS THAT EVERYTHING WAS GOING BACK TO WHERE IT CAME FROM, THAT IS, TO MOTHER EARTH.

HE THEN FREED THE CAPTURED ARCHANAYANS. THEY COULD NOT BELIEVE IT. THEIR LEADER, EZEK RU - SECOND ONLY TO VOLTARIAN - LOOKED ON IN AMAZEMENT. THE ARCHANAYANS LOOKED A LITTLE LONELY, BUT UNDER THEIR WISE BROWS, EYES FULL OF SADNESS PEERED OUT. THE HUMAN BIRDS HUGGED GORDON. HE FELL TO HIS KNEES AND ASKED FOR FORGIVENESS. HIS TEARS DID NOT GO

UNNOTICED. THE ARCHANAYANS WONDERED WHAT HAD CAUSED THE SUDDEN CHANGE, BUT THEY WERE SURE IT WAS GENUINE.

SO MANY DESTINIES HAD BEEN PUT TO THE TEST. GORDON KNEW WHAT TO DO, AND HE WOULD DO IT. THIS TIME HE HAD DECIDED TO ATONE FOR HIS CRIMES.

WITH PART OF THE MONEY HE SUPPORTED ALL OF THEM. HE SENT FOR TREATMENT THE REPRESENTATIVES OF THIS RACE WHO HAD SPENT A LONG TIME IN THE PRISON OF OSONIA. AS IT WAS KNOWN, THEY WERE ALMOST IMMORTAL, SO THE TIME THEY HAD SPENT HADN'T AFFECTED THEIR APPEARANCE MUCH. DURING THE TIME GORDON AND CHRIS HAD BEEN IN THE ANTIVERSE, SEVERAL GENERATIONS HAD CHANGED ON OSONIA. THE PREVIOUS INHABITANTS DIDN'T REMEMBER GORDON. HE WALKED THE STREETS OF THE POLIS. MOTHERS WALKING THEIR CHILDREN LOOKED AT HIM STRANGELY. OSONIA WAS A FAIRLY PEACEFUL PLANET, SO THE LOCALS DIDN'T SEEM IMPRESSED EVEN IF A STRANGER LIKE GORDON SHOWED UP. THE ONLY ONES WHO RECOGNIZED HIM BY NAME ALONE WERE THE DESCENDANTS OF THOSE GUARDS HE HAD HANDPICKED TO GUARD HIS RICHES.

THE GOVERNOR'S ENTIRE FORTUNE WAS STORED IN THE CAVE OF TUBUR NOG. ONLY A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE HAD ACCESS THERE. THIS CAVE WASN'T PARTICULARLY LARGE, BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, THE TWO DOZEN SMALL CAVERNS WITHIN IT HAD STORED THE GOVERNOR'S VARIOUS VALUABLES. HE KNEW WELL WHERE TO STORE HIS POSSESSIONS.

- 'SHALL WE LOAD UP YOUR TREASURES, SIR?,' THE HEAD OF HIS GUARD, WHO PROBABLY HADN'T BEEN BORN WHEN GORDON LEFT OSONIA, BARKED.

- 'CERTAINLY, MY BOY,' GORDON SPOKE KINDLY, GRINNING EAR TO EAR. NOW HIS SMILE WAS GENUINE. HE WANTED TO BE GOOD AND HE WAS TRYING HIS BEST TO THAT END.

- 'IT MIGHT TAKE A LITTLE LONGER,' THE GUARD FRETTE.

- 'YOU'VE GOT ALL THE TIME YOU NEED,' GORDON SAID CALMLY. 'NO-ONE'S ARGUING WITH YOU.'

THE PEOPLE OF OSONIA HAD FOUND OUT ABOUT THE GOVERNOR'S INTENTIONS AND HIS GRAND PLANS. HE HAD BEEN INVITED TO MAKE A SPEECH. THE INHABITANTS HEARD WITH SHOCK HIS CONFESSIONS OF THE TERRIBLE CRIMES COMMITTED ON HIS HOME PLANET. GORDON WAS NATURALLY TO BLAME FOR MOST OF THEM. HIS STATUS AS GOVERNOR OF A PLANET AND HIS IMMENSE WEALTH GUARANTEED HIM THE PERSONAL INVIOABILITY OF OSONIA, BUT NOT OF SEBUR NAG, WHICH WAS ON FRIENDLY TERMS WITH ZEGANDARIA. HE HAD TO TREAD CAREFULLY. HE COULDN'T AFFORD TO BE IMPRISONED OR KILLED BEFORE COMPLETING HIS MISSION.

OSONIA WAS THE PERFECT PLANET TO START A FAMILY, WHICH MIGHT HAVE BEEN A GOOD CHOICE WITH ANOTHER HUMAN, BUT GORDON ELMBAUM WAS DEFINITELY NOT YOUR AVERAGE SPECIMEN. SUCH A SELFISH MAN HAD RARELY BEEN BORN. GORDON SOMETIMES LOATHED HIMSELF. AND THERE WAS REASON WHY.

THE REMORSE EXPRESSED BY GORDON FOR HIS DEEDS WAS HEEDED BY THE PEOPLE OF OSONIA. AFTER ALL, THEY WERE APPALLED BY THE VARIOUS CRIMES AND AGREED THAT THE GOVERNOR SHOULD SHOW SOME MORALITY AND SERVE HIS PUNISHMENT IN A PRISON CELL. THEY DID NOT EVEN SUSPECT THAT HE WAS ONE OF THE FOUNDERS OF LABOR COLONY 206.

ALTHOUGH HE DIDN'T WANT TO STAY TOO LONG ON OSONIA, GORDON WAS FORCED BY CIRCUMSTANCES TO STAY A LITTLE LONGER. CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS HIS RIGHT-HAND MAN. STILL. HE ALSO FELT IT HIS DUTY TO HELP.

ON WHAT HAPPENED TO PALEY. GENE PALEY, WHO WAS ALSO ONE OF HIS MAIN ASSOCIATES. WHEN THEY HAD LEFT SEBUR NAG, THE ADMIRAL HAD FIRMLY STATED HIS OPINION THAT HE DID NOT WISH TO CONTINUE WITH THEM. IN THE ENSUING SCANDAL, HE HAD EVEN PULLED OUT HIS PERSONAL WEAPON. GORDON COULDN'T LET HIM LIVE NATURALLY. AND HE HAD ORDERED HIM TO BE STRANGLED WITH

A PIECE OF QUIZON. HIS GRAVE WAS NEAR A PICTURESQUE COLONY-VILLAGE NEAR NARAS TU, THE CAPITAL OF SEBUR NAG. NOW HE FELT HE MUST VISIT HIS OLD FRIEND.

HAVING ARRANGED ALL POSSIBLE FORMALITIES, THE GOVERNOR WAS READY TO DEPART. IT WAS MORE THAN OBVIOUS THAT HE WAS LOOKING FORWARD TO IT. AND THERE WAS REASON WHY.

BEFORE FALLING ASLEEP, HE CLASPED HIS HANDS FOR THE FIRST TIME IN PRAYER:

‘O GREAT MIDRIEL, I HAVE COMMITTED SO MANY SINS.

I KNOW I AM NOT WORTHY TO ASK FOR FORGIVENESS.

I WILL SURRENDER WILLINGLY, BUT NOT BEFORE I MAKE THINGS  
RIGHT.’

THEN HE FELL ASLEEP. AND SLEPT LIKE A BABY.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: LEAVING

MEIOR AND BECKY WANDERED THE ENDLESS ELANDON FIELD, BUT WITHOUT BEING ABLE TO FIND THEIR BEARINGS. THEY DIDN'T HAVE EVEN THE MOST RUDIMENTARY COMPASS. THE CROPS HAD BEEN UTTERLY DESTROYED BY THE EXPLOSIONS, AND THE LAND WAS DISGUSTINGLY PLOUGHED AND PLOUGHED. IT WAS SIMPLY UNPLEASANT TO LOOK AT. SO MUCH SADNESS. SO MUCH HOPELESSNESS. THEIR NATIVE HOME WAS DESTROYED.

- 'YOU KNOW BECKY, EVEN THOUGH YOU WILL NEVER BE MINE, YOU BROUGHT ME OUT OF THE DESPONDENCY I LIVED IN AS A FRESHMAN. OTHER PEOPLE'S PROBLEMS ARE ABOVE YOUR OWN. YOU TAUGHT

ME TO LIVE FOR MORE THAN MYSELF,' MEIOR TOLD HER IN ALL SERIOUSNESS.

- 'THAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH THIS POLIS. EVERYONE HERE LIVES ONLY FOR THEMSELVES,' HER VOICE HELD IRRITATION.

THEY WANDERED FOR A FEW DAYS. BUT MOST UNEXPECTEDLY, BECKY LOOKED AT THE MARK ON HER ARM. SHE REMEMBERED A DREAM IN WHICH A BOY HAD THE SAME SCAR. HIS NAME WAS DURNYAM. SHE HAD HAD THIS DREAM RECENTLY.

- 'HOW ARE YOU FEELING, BECKY?,' ASKED MEIOR, CONCERNED ABOUT HER CONDITION.

- 'I'M FINE, JUST A BAD DREAM, AND A BAD DREAM AT THAT, AND SOMETHING INSIDE TELLS ME THAT IT'S FOR MY OWN GOOD,' SHE SAID SOMEWHAT CONFUSEDLY.

MARK AND HIS GROUP WERE ALREADY DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAIN, WITH KIER ZOH LEADING THEM WITH THE INSTINCT OF A KILLER DOG. HIS RACE WAS EASY TO NAVIGATE, EVEN BY SIGNS LIKE SMALL STONES AND SO ON. IN THE DISTANCE, THEY GLIMPSED BECKY AND MEIOR. THE TWO OF THEM HAD A PITIFUL LOOK. ALONG THE WAY, THEY HAD ALSO LOST PART OF THE GROUP. THE RAT HAD FALLEN INTO A DEEP CAVERN AND DIED RIDICULOUSLY. THE FATHER HAD ALSO DIED, DRAGGED BY IT. THE TREACHEROUS PONIES HAD HAD THEIR SAY WHEN IT CAME TO CROSSING THE MOUNTAINS. THE TREK OF MORE THAN A THOUSAND KILOMETERS THEY HAD TAKEN IN SEVEN DAYS. THEY HAD SLEPT ONLY TWO OR THREE HOURS.

THE CAPITAL WOULD BE REACHED IN SOME MORE TIME. KIER ZOH HAD MANAGED TO KILL GAME FOR HIS COMPANIONS TO FEED ON. A GREAT HUNTER, HE WAS ALSO NO MEAN COOK. THOUGH THEY DID NOT SPEAK EACH OTHER'S LANGUAGES, THEY UNDERSTOOD EACH OTHER WITH SIGNS. COMMUNICATION WAS NOT A PROBLEM FOR EITHER OF THEM. OF THE WHOLE GROUP, ONLY MARK, PAUL, DURNYAM, SAM WALLACE, GRANDPA JACK, RUSSELL, AND OF COURSE, KIER ZOH WERE LEFT.

WHEN THEY SAW THEM, BECKY AND MEIOR STARTED TO RUN, BUT TRIPPED AND FELL ON THEIR EYES.

MARK AND PAUL WENT TO PICK THEM UP. KIER ZOH LOOKED A LITTLE SURPRISED AT SUCH AN EMOTIONAL OUTPOURING ON THEIR PART. HUMAN EMOTIONS WERE STILL ALIEN TO HIM. BUT SOMEHOW HE WAS BEGINNING TO SENSE THE CHANGE IN HIMSELF. APPARENTLY COMMUNICATING WITH HUMAN BEINGS WAS LIKE THAT. DEEP INSIDE HE WAS SOMEHOW BEGINNING TO ACCEPT IT.

BECKY AND MEIOR TOLD THEM WHAT THEY KNEW.

- 'LET'S GO NOW,' THEY ALL CALLED IN CHORUS.

THEY HAD FOUND THE DISCARDED NIRANGAITERS AND ZIRUARX OF ZORIN'S MURDERED TEAM. THEY WERE PLENTY FOR THEIR LITTLE GROUP. AFTER ABOUT TWO WEEKS, THEY HAD REACHED IMGRADON. THEY DIDN'T DARE VENTURE IN AGAIN. BECKY AND MEIOR WONDERED WHY THEY HAD TO COME BACK HERE AT ALL, BUT AFTER LEARNING WHAT IT WAS REALLY ALL ABOUT THEY READILY DECIDED TO HELP TO THE BEST OF THEIR ABILITY.

WHEN THEY ENTERED THE CITY, THEY FOUND THAT IT HAD LONG BEEN AN ASH HEAP, AND THE DESTRUCTION HAD TURNED IT INTO SOMETHING OF AN ISLAND, SURROUNDED BY THE WASHED OUT WATERS OF THE EXPLODED GEOTHERMAL VENT. THERE WAS NO SIGN OF THE ST. JOSEPH CLINIC.

THERE WAS NO SIGN OF POSTS OR GUARDS. ABSOLUTELY NO LIVING SOUL.

- 'GORDON HAD BLOWN SOMEWHERE. DEFINITELY IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION,' MARK SAID ANGRILY.

THEY HEARD A COUGH. BEHIND THEM WAS KEITH. HE HAD CAREFULLY GONE TO ENSARIAN AND TOLD SPEARS AND ELISANDRA WHAT HAD HAPPENED. EVEN THOUGH ENSARIAN HAD COMPLETELY COLLAPSED, THERE WERE STILL SMALL FRESH RESOURCES HIDDEN IN THE UNDERGROUND BUNKER AND ALSO SOME REMNANTS OF HIS

VAST ARMY. THEY HAD AGREED TO JOIN AND CAPTURE GORDON. WITH TEARS IN THEIR EYES, SPEARS AND ELISANDRA LEARNED THE SAD TRUTH ABOUT JACOB WALLACE AND THE NEED TO GO TO WAR WITH HIS OWN RACE TO PROTECT THE LIVES OF HIS FALLEN SOLDIERS AND THEIR FAMILIES, HORRIBLY DISFIGURED BY THE GOVERNOR'S EXPERIMENTS.

THAT MUCH WAS CLEAR. HE HAD TO BE PUNISHED.

MARK REACTED SOMEWHAT ANGRILY BECAUSE HE THOUGHT KEITH WAS PLAYING A DOUBLE GAME, BUT ONCE HE SAW THE EBONIAN AND KIER ZOH CONFIRMED HIS CLAIMS, ALL DOUBTS WERE GONE.

THERE WASN'T ANYTHING IN ALL OF IMGRADON THAT COULD BE USED. THERE WASN'T EVEN POTABLE WATER.

- 'IT WILL BE DIFFICULT TO GET TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT, BUT NOT IMPOSSIBLE,' CALLED GRANDFATHER JACK. 'A COWBOY LIKE ME UNDERSTANDS THIS AND THAT! BUT WE'VE GOT TO FIND A FLYING MACHINE!'

THEY DECIDED TO WAIT FOR THE REMNANTS OF THE ENSARIAN ARMY TO REACH ELOHY. SOME OF THE GUARRON, LED BY NUNDRAG, JOINED AS WELL. THEY HAD TO DRAW UP A GENERAL PLAN OF ATTACK AGAINST THE GOVERNOR. AND THIS TIME THEY HAD TO CATCH HIM DEAD OR ALIVE.

THEY DECIDED TO GO TO THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT. THE OPERATION TO CAPTURE HIM STILL HAD TO START SOMEWHERE.

THE GIGANTIC FACILITY WAS ONE OF THE PRIDES OF ZEGANDARIA, AS ROUGHLY ALL THE FLYING VEHICLES ON THE PLANET WERE MADE THERE. THEY HOPED TO FIND AT LEAST ONE OR TWO SURVIVORS TO USE FIRST. MIGHT AS WELL HAVE SOME PARTS.

AAA

REONA ALONG WITH THE REST OF THE STUDENTS WERE PULLED OUT OF THE RESCUE SQUADS THE ENSARIANS WERE ORGANIZING. THEY WATCHED WITH DISBELIEVING EYES BECAUSE THEY THOUGHT THEY WERE IRRETRIEVABLY LOST. ELOHY WAS IN A WORSE SITUATION. THEY HAD TO HELP PEOPLE IN DISTRESS. IT ALL SEEMED TO BE FORGOTTEN VERY QUICKLY ONCE THEY WERE UNITED IN THEIR HATRED OF THE COMMON ENEMY.

SHE AND BECKY BOTH HUGGED EACH OTHER. MEIOR STOOD OFF TO THE SIDE. MARK ALSO MADE A REMEMBRANCE OF FATHER AND RAT AND THEIR RIDICULOUS DEMISE. HE HAD TO ACKNOWLEDGE THEIR SERVICES TO THE MUTUAL SURVIVAL OF THE ENTIRE TEAM. THEY WOULD BE MISSED BY ALL. THE FIGHTERS EACH SHED A MANLY TEAR. BUT IN A SITUATION LIKE THIS, IT WAS PERFECTLY NORMAL.

HOWEVER, HERE AND THERE IN THE CITY THERE WERE SOME ALIVE. IT TURNED OUT THAT ONE OF THE CAVERNS WAS INTACT AND THE LAST REMNANTS OF THE TOWN'S POPULATION HAD TAKEN SHELTER THERE. ONE HUNDRED AND EIGHTY PEOPLE IN ALL. THE SURVIVORS OF ENSARIAN, INCLUDING THOSE FROM THE UNDERGROUND BUNKER, NUMBERED AROUND FOUR HUNDRED. ROIAN - LIZ AND PINDOR'S SON - WAS ALSO AMONG THEM. THE BOY HAD MANAGED TO FIND FOOD IN ONE QUADRANT AND LITERALLY PULL IT OUT OF THE HANDS OF A DYING MAN WHO DIDN'T NEED IT. WHEN THE FIGHTING WAS OVER, HE LEFT WITH THE OTHERS. ZARAG TU'S SURVIVING GUARRON DID NOT NUMBER MORE THAN TWO HUNDRED AND FIFTY, BUT SOME OF THEM WERE WOUNDED. ACCORDING TO THE LAWS OF THEIR RACE, THEY WERE TO BE EXECUTED BY THEIR FELLOWS. BUT THE GUARRON REALIZED HOW POINTLESS THAT WAS NOW.

THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE PLANET NOW NUMBERED UNDER A THOUSAND OF ALL RACES.

MARK STOOD UP TO SPEAK. ALL EYES WERE FIXED ON HIM. THE GUARRON DIDN'T UNDERSTAND HIS SPEECH, BUT THEY IMMEDIATELY



SAW IN HIM THE STRONG LEADER, AND THAT SUBDUED THEM. HE KNEW HOW TO LEAD THE GROUP. THEY FELT IT INSTINCTIVELY.

- IT WAS TIME FOR THIS PLANET TO HAVE NEW LIFE; IT WAS TIME FOR THE TRUTH TO BE TOLD. YOUR LEADER IS MY COMMANDER, GENERAL JACOB WALLACE.

THE GUARRON UNDERSTOOD HIM. THEY TOO HAD HEARD OF THE FACT THAT THEY WERE A HYBRID RACE, BUT THEY PREFERRED TO BELIEVE IN THE LEGENDS THAT SILENCED THEIR PAIN.

MARK CONTINUED. HE HAD TO USE A MIXTURE OF HUMAN AND GUARRONS SPEECH HE HAD LEARNED AT THE ENSARIAN CADET SCHOOL.

- EVEN IF WE CATCH THAT SCOUNDREL ELMBAUM, IT WON'T BRING BACK THE SHATTERED ECOSYSTEM OF THIS PLANET, OR YOUR BATTLE COMRADES. AS A DECLARED EXTRAORDINARY PROXY BY THE MEMBERS OF THE UBUNDER MILITARY COUNCIL, AND WITH THE POWERS GRANTED TO ME BY THE SURVIVING ELOHIANS, I SUGGEST WE USE THE LAST SURVIVING SHIPS OF THE URUS ONX SPACEPORT AND LEAVE THIS PLANET FOR GOOD.

EVERYONE LOOKED AROUND. NO ONE HAD EXPECTED SUCH A THING.

- 'FRIENDS,' MARK ADDRESSED THEM, 'THE CHOICE IS YOURS. BUT WE CAN START AFRESH. THIS GALAXY IS LARGE ENOUGH FOR US TO FIND A PLANET WITH SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS TO ZEGANDARIA.'

ZARAG TU STOOD BESIDE HIM. HIS TWO SONS, TOO.

- 'THIS MAN SPEAKS THE VERY TRUTH TO YOU,' HE BEGAN IN GUARRON, AND THE FIGHTERS LISTENED MOST ATTENTIVELY. 'THERE IS NO POINT IN BEING ENEMIES ANYMORE. THE POPULATION HAS BEEN DESTROYED. IT IS POINTLESS TO LET US ALL PERISH. THE GUARRON LOOKED ON IN SOME DISBELIEF. THEY NEEDED SOME TIME TO PROCESS WHAT WAS BEING SAID. BUT FINALLY THEY ACCEPTED IT.'

SOMEONE DARED TO ASK:

- WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WHEN WE CATCH THE GOVERNOR?

MARK TOOK THAT QUESTION SERIOUSLY ENOUGH.

- THAT'S FOR YOU TO DECIDE. I THINK IT'S EVERYBODY'S RIGHT TO JUDGE HIM, NOT JUST OURS. BUT I ALSO THINK MAYBE WE SHOULD FOLLOW HIM INTO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. WE CAN ALL START OVER THERE.

- 'WHAT IF OUR BODIES CAN'T ADAPT TO THE NEW CONDITIONS?,' SOMEONE ELSE ASKED.

- WE'LL BUILD A SMALL COLONY FIRST, AND THEN A SETTLEMENT ON AN EXOPLANET WITH SIMILAR CHARACTERISTICS. ZEGANDARIA WAS ALSO MUCH WILDER BEFORE ANYONE SETTLED HERE AT ALL.

EVERYONE ACCEPTED HIS ARGUMENT WITH CONVICTION.

SPEARS AND ELISANDRA ALSO JOINED IN AS THE ONLY SURVIVING SENIOR MILITARY.

- 'WE STAND FIRMLY BEHIND YOU. 'BUT AT THE MOMENT WE CAN PROVIDE YOU WITH ALMOST ONLY GROUND FORCES AND ALMOST NO AIRCRAFT,' THEY REGRETTED.

HERE MARK INTERRUPTED THEM.

- GORDON DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO DESTROY ALL THE AERIAL VEHICLES IN THE SPACEPORT. WE HAVE TWO SURVIVORS WHICH, THOUGH IN POOR CONDITION, CAN BE REPAIRED.

- 'WE'LL MOBILISE ALL OUR SPECIALISTS,' SPEARS NOTED.

INDEED, TWO VOLTAN SHUTTLES HAD SURVIVED, DESPITE EXPLOSIONS AND ALSO DELIBERATE ARSON. THAT HAD TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT. BUT IT ALSO HAD TO BE SAID THAT THEY WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN ENOUGH TO EVACUATE ALL OF THE NEARLY SEVEN HUNDRED SURVIVORS.

ENGINEERING TEAMS BEGAN TO REBUILD THEM, BUT THE PLACES STILL WOULDN'T BE ENOUGH. THEY HAD TO COME UP WITH SOMETHING.

- 'AND WHY NOT ACTUALLY TAKE OUT THE COCKPIT AND PUT IN A BRAND NEW ANTI-GRAVITY LANDING GEAR? THAT WAY, ALL THE PASSENGERS WOULD BE ON ONE BIG COMMON PLATFORM AND WE COULD HAUL MORE,' ENGINEER ANDREW DISLAN OPINED.

- 'IT WOULD CHANGE THE CENTRE OF GRAVITY OF THE VEHICLE, BUT IN A VACUUM ENVIRONMENT, IT SHOULDN'T MATTER THAT MUCH, AS LONG AS THERE ARE NO PROBLEMS IN THE VERTICAL TAKE-OFF,' ADDED ONE OF HIS COLLEAGUES.

- 'SOUNDS REASONABLE. WE CAN AT LEAST TRY,' DISLAN AGREED.

NATURALLY THINGS WEREN'T GOING VERY SMOOTHLY, MUCH LESS PLEASANTLY. ADMIRAL SPEARS' DAUGHTER, GABRIELLE, WAS HANGING AROUND. SHE WAS ONLY FIFTEEN YEARS OLD, BUT SHE WAS TERRIBLY KEEN ON ALL SORTS OF FLYING APPARATUS. DESPITE HER TENDER AGE, SHE KNEW TOO MUCH. THE GUARRONS SOMEHOW LIKED HER BECAUSE SHE WAS TOO VIVACIOUS AGAINST THE GENERAL GREY BACKGROUND. SHE WAS THE SOUL OF THIS PLACE. OR AS THEY AFFECTIONATELY CALLED HER, GABBY.

EQUAN STABILIZERS WERE NOT SUITABLE FOR HIGH-END SHIPS BECAUSE THEY COULD NOT SUFFICIENTLY STABILIZE THE THRUST OF LARGE ION ENGINES. THE TWO VOLTAN SHUTTLES HAD JUST SUCH ENGINES. IT WAS NOT AMONG ELMBAUM'S PRIORITIES TO LEAVE THEM THE SHUTTLES WITH THE BEST ENGINES. HIS OWN WERE REBUILT WITH TACHYON ENGINES, WHICH WERE AN EXCELLENT OPTION AND FARED MUCH BETTER THAN THEIR ION COUNTERPARTS. THE ONLY REASON ELMBAUM HADN'T SET THEM ON FIRE OR BLOWN THEM UP WAS THAT THERE WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN ENOUGH TIME TO GET AWAY.

- 'YOU KNOW THIS PLANET IS SO BORING? I'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO ESCAPE TO SOMEPLACE REALLY INTERESTING,' SHE LOOKED AT HIM WITH THAT CHILDLIKE LOOK THAT WOULD MAKE A ROCK MELT.

DISLAN WAS ONLY WORKING. HE HAD TO CHECK SOME THINGS ABOUT THE ENGINE THRUST. WHILE ION ENGINES COULD THEORETICALLY ACHIEVE HIGHER SPEEDS THAN THEIR CHEMICAL EQUIVALENTS, THE THRUST PROBLEM REMAINED. THERE WAS ANOTHER DRAWBACK. IF SOMETHING WENT WRONG, THERE WAS NO WAY TO MAKE REPAIRS IN OPEN SPACE. EVERYTHING HAD TO BE WORKED OUT VERY SLOWLY AND CAREFULLY.

- 'I'VE HEARD THAT ONLY CRIMINALS AND ADVENTURERS GO TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. BUT MAYBE YOU'RE MORE FAMILIAR THAN I AM?,' SHE TRIED TO SOMEHOW TALK HIM DOWN.

DISLAN WAS NOT THE MOST TALKATIVE OF PEOPLE. HE LIKED EVEN LESS TO HAVE SOMEONE 'GRIND' ON HIS HEAD WHILE HE HAD SERIOUS AND RESPONSIBLE WORK TO DO. SO HE FORCED HIMSELF TO ANSWER.

- THAT WAS THE WAY TO TALK. IN FACT, HARDLY ANYONE FROM THIS PLANET WAS THERE. THERE ARE TOO MANY UNKNOWNNS SURROUNDING THIS PLACE. AND MAYBE IT'S NOT EXACTLY WHAT THEY'RE TALKING ABOUT EITHER.

- 'WHY ARE YOU TALKING IN RIDDLES?,' SHE ASKED HIM.

- 'BECAUSE IT IS THE VERY TRUTH!,' HE ANSWERED HER, A LITTLE CLUMSILY.

- 'ACCESS TO IT IS SIMPLY FORBIDDEN BY THE MILITARY COUNCIL. AND NOT ONLY THAT,' THOSE WERE APPARENTLY THE LAST WORDS TO ROLL OFF HIS TONGUE.

GABRIEL LOOKED AROUND. WHY DID EVERYTHING HAVE TO SEEM SO STRANGE. SHE JUST WASN'T USED TO NOT HAVING A QUESTION ANSWERED. SHE WAS DADDY'S FAVORITE DAUGHTER. AND AS SUCH, SHE SHOULD ALWAYS GET WHAT SHE WANTED. FOR NOW, SHE

PRETENDED TO RESIGN HERSELF TO NOT GETTING THE INFORMATION SHE WANTED. BUT ONLY FOR NOW. EVERYONE WAS GOING TO TELL HER SOMETHING SOONER OR LATER.

SHE STARTED WALKING AROUND AMONG THE BUSTLING PEOPLE, MAKING FINAL PREPARATIONS BEFORE THEY LEFT THE PLANET. EVERYONE WAS BUSY ORGANIZING THEIR OWN SURVIVAL. THE GUARRON WANTED TO AT LEAST TAKE THEIR LASER CUTTERS, BECAUSE WITHOUT THEM THEY DIDN'T FEEL SAFE. THE HUMANS, ON THE OTHER HAND, WERE CLAMORING FOR MORE BOTTLES OF COMPRESSED AIR. FINALLY, SOME BALANCE WAS ACHIEVED.

THE TWO SHUTTLES WOULDN'T BE ENOUGH TO EVACUATE ABSOLUTELY EVERYONE, BUT THEY COULD TRY TO BOARD SOME OTHER SHIPS IN CLOSE ORBIT THAT HAD THE POTENTIAL TO AT LEAST TRANSPORT SOME OF THE PASSENGERS TO THE FIRST WAYPOINT WHERE THEY COULD FIND BETTER SHIPS. SURELY THEY'D COME UP WITH SOMETHING ON THE FLY.

THE PREPARATIONS TOOK SEVERAL DAYS. FINALLY EVERYTHING SEEMED TO BE READY. THERE WERE NO MALCONTENTS, BUT THAT'S WHY EVERYONE WANTED TO TAKE ONE LAST GOODBYE TO THEIR HOMETOWN.

THEY WERE GOING TO MISS IT A LOT. THE BEAUTIFUL CRIMSON REFLECTIONS OF THE SKY THAT SO RESEMBLED A MOLTEN COPPER PLATE, IRIDESCENT IN DIFFERENT SHADES. SO UNFATHOMABLE TO MOST OF THEM. NOW HE WOULD ACCEPT THEM AND BE THEIR SALVATION.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: THE CHASE

- 'ZORIN SPEAKING,' THE SERGEANT'S LOW, THICK VOICE CAME OVER THE RADIO. HE'D ALREADY EARNED THE RESPECT OF CAPTAIN PENROSE, WHO WAS MAGNANIMOUSLY CEDING TO HIM SOME

AMATEURISH TASKS THAT ZORIN WAS HANDLING BRILLIANTLY AND HAD NO CAUSE TO COMPLAIN ABOUT. WHATEVER WE SAY, THE CAPTAIN HAD A KEEN EYE FOR VALUABLE FOOTAGE. EVEN MORE SO FOR THOSE WHO MIGHT WELL PROVE INDISPENSABLE.

- 'WE NEED TO CHANGE SOME PARAMETERS ON THE SHIP'S COURSE,' ZORIN VOICED HIS CONCERNS, 'SINCE YOU'RE COMING FROM THE COLONY, THE ENGINES SHOULD DEFINITELY BE SHUT DOWN FOR A WHILE. ONCE WE GET THE AUXILIARY ION THRUSTERS ONLINE, WE CAN PROCEED.'

- 'ONE WOULD THINK YOU WERE BORN ON A SHIP, SERGEANT, YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE BECOME A MARINE, YOU SHOULD HAVE BECOME A SPACE WOLF,' THE CAPTAIN NOTED.

- 'I'M LEARNING ON THE FLY, CAPTAIN PENROSE. SASIA IS AN EXCELLENT PILOT,' HE SAID RATHER FLATTERINGLY. 'I LEARNED TO LOVE THE SKY FROM HER, TOO. I HATED IT BEFORE. BUT NOW I LOOK AT IT WITH DIFFERENT EYES.'

- 'YOU LIKE TO PHILOSOPHISE, MY DEAR,' SAID PENROSE QUITE SERIOUSLY.

- 'HEAVEN CAN BE EVEN MORE INSIDIOUS THAN EARTH,' HE THREW IN QUITE SERIOUSLY.

SASIA HAD BEEN APPOINTED NAVIGATOR BECAUSE SHE HAD A MORE THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE OF CALCULATING TRAJECTORIES. WHAT SHE DIDN'T KNOW, SHE WOULD LEARN ON THE FLY. AND SHE WAS A SMART GIRL. SHE JUST WASN'T INTO AVIONICS NOW, BUT SPACECRAFT. TWO WEEKS WAS ENOUGH TIME FOR HER TO LEARN SOME BASIC SKILLS, AT LEAST AS FAR AS CALCULATING SPACE COURSES WAS CONCERNED.

- 'HOW LONG WOULD IT TAKE TO GET THERE?,' WONDERED KENJI.

- 'IT'S HARD TO SAY,' PENROSE TURNED TO HIM. 'BUT ONE THING I KNOW FOR CERTAIN. THERE ARE A LOT OF THINGS THAT CAN CHANGE. FOR EXAMPLE, WE USE SUBJECTIVE TIME WHEN WE MAKE

A TIME JUMP FROM POINT A TO POINT B. BUT HERE WE GO FOR THE FIRST TIME. WE DON'T KNOW AT ALL WHAT IS WAITING FOR US ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TUNNEL. EVERYTHING HAS TO FALL INTO PLACE THOUGH. WE ARE PROFESSIONALS. IF ELMBAUM WANTS TO GET THERE, THEN WE CAN DO IT. AND NO WORSE THAN HIM.'

- 'WE'LL HAVE TO GET THROUGH THE POSTS IN STAR QUADRANT FORTY-FIVE BEFORE WE MAKE SEVERAL CONSECUTIVE JUMPS TO QUADRANT 426. THE SHUTTLES' ARMAMENTS ARE UP TO PAR, BUT NOT THAT UP TO PAR. WE MIGHT HAVE PROBLEMS,' LINUS VOICED HIS CONCERNS, THE SAME ONE WHO'D RIBBED THE CAPTAIN ABOUT HIS BRIEFING ON THE RICHWATER.

- 'THE EMZIROU IS AN EXTRAORDINARY PROJECT,' THE CAPTAIN MUTTERED. 'ONE OF THE FEW FITTED WITH TACHYON ENGINES. AN IMPRESSIVE SHIP!'

THE CREW BUSTLED ABOUT DOING THEIR JOB AS BEST THEY COULD. ADJUSTMENTS HAD TO BE MADE TO THE CALCULATIONS. TOO MUCH SERIOUS WORK HAD TO BE DONE. AND THERE WAS NO ONE TO WAIT FOR THEM!

THEY HAD TO CHANGE EVERYTHING FUNDAMENTALLY.

AN INTERESTING EXAMPLE COULD BE MADE OF EVERYONE'S CHILDHOOD, WHEN EACH DAY SEEMED VERY LONG, AND TO THE ADULT IT WAS RATHER SHORT AND MONOTONOUS, AS WERE MANY OF THE OTHER PRECEDING DAYS.

- 'THIS UNIVERSE IS JUST A PROTOSTELLAR CLOUD,' PENROSE WAXED POETIC. 'AND LOOK WHAT IT'S EVOLVED INTO IN ALL ITS EXISTENCE.'

IN PREPARATION FOR MAKING A FLIGHT AT SUPERLUMINAL SPEED, SOME PREPARATIONS NATURALLY HAD TO BE MADE. THE FIRST, AND MOST SERIOUS, WAS TO DON SPECIAL NANOSUITS TO ENABLE THE BODIES OF THE CREW TO BEAR THE DIFFERENCE IN ACCELERATION. SECOND, THE TACHYON ENGINES HAD TO BE SET UP AS WELL. IT WAS WELL KNOWN FROM PHYSICS THAT BY LOSING ENERGY, THE

TACHYONS ACCELERATED. BUT HERE WE HAD TO RECALL THAT THE DIFFERENT TACHYON ENGINES WERE NOT THE SAME. 'THE EMSIRU HAD A SPECIAL KIND OF THEM, WHICH, BESIDES HAVING BUILT-IN ION STABILIZERS BEFORE REACHING FULL POWER, COULD ALSO WARP SPACE THROUGH THE SO-CALLED 'WARP ENGINE' .

ACCELERATION WAS REACHED RELATIVELY QUICKLY. HOWEVER, ONE THING HAD TO BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT. WHEN SPACE WAS CURVED AND A MATERIAL BODY WAS ABLE TO PASS THROUGH IT, THE FINAL DESTINATION HAD TO BE ACCURATELY CALCULATED.

PENROSE HAD EXPERIENCE WITH THE CICADA CONSTELLATION IN STELLAR QUADRANT 415, BUT HAD NO IDEA WHAT AWAITED THEM IN THE 426TH QUADRANT.

THE SPACE SHUTTLE WAS ABOUT TO BE PUT TO THE TEST.

- 'I'VE DONE TIME JUMPS,' KENJI ADMITTED TO HIMSELF. 'IT WOULD BE INTERESTING TO PARTICIPATE.'

- VERY WELL, REAR ADMIRAL, YOU WILL BE IN CHARGE OF SPECIFIC PARTS OF THE SPACE MASS CALCULATION PROJECT. THE SET PARAMETERS ARE VERY IMPORTANT, ESPECIALLY IN CASE WE MANAGE TO DEAL WITH A POSSIBLE AMBUSH ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE TIME TUNNEL.

KENJI SET TO WORK ON THE CALCULATIONS. HE HAD TO HURRY.

EVERYONE DONNED THEIR NANOSUITS AND BEGAN TO MENTALLY PREPARE FOR THE LEAP INTO THE UNKNOWN.

^^^

THE TIME-SPACE JUMP WAS SUCCESSFUL, WITH THE MASS TRANSFER CALCULATION OF A MATERIAL OBJECT IN SPACE DEFINITELY BEING KENJI'S DOING. HE WAS SIMPLY BRILLIANT. BUT THAT WAS HOW EXHAUSTING THIS WHOLE EXERCISE HAD TURNED OUT TO BE. THEY MANAGED TO RECOVER THE SHIP'S COURSE.



HAVING ALSO HAD TO USE SEBUR NAG AS AN INTERMEDIATE STATION.

THERE THEY HAD TO REFUEL WITH PROVISIONS AND ALSO SOME OTHER THINGS. YES, IT WAS A PRIMITIVE PLANET, BUT IT WAS THE ONLY HABITABLE ONE IN A RANGE OF MANY LIGHT YEARS AWAY. THEY DECIDED TO SPEND THE NIGHT IN THE CAPITAL CITY OF NARAS TU. THIS STRANGE CITY WAS ANYTHING BUT MODERN. IT COULDN'T COMPARE TO ENSARIAN OR IMGRADON. IT COULDN'T, AND IT SHOULDN'T.

THE VIOLIN PEOPLE, AS WE MIGHT CALL THEM, WERE COMFORTABLE ON THEIR HOME PLANET, AS THEY WERE NOT REQUIRED TO DO ANYTHING EXTRAORDINARY. ALL THEY HAD TO DO WAS WORK AND PRODUCE PLEXONIARS, WHICH WAS THE PLANET'S MAIN EXPORT COMMODITY. THE OTHER, AND ONLY, ATTRACTION WAS THE DANCE FESTIVAL. THE PEOPLE OF THIS PLANET LOVED TO DANCE. AND THEY DID IT LAUGHING. THAT'S HOW THEY FELT ABOUT LIFE.

KENJI, CAPTAIN PENROSE AND COMPANY AGREED THAT THERE COULD HARDLY BE A MORE RELAXING PLACE TO REST BEFORE MAKING THE NEXT SERIES OF HYPERSPACE JUMPS. AND IT WOULD HAVE ALL GONE QUITE HARMLESSLY AND UNEVENTFULLY IF KENJI HADN'T DECIDED TO TAKE A STROLL THROUGH THE COUNTRYSIDE. ASIDE FROM THE AFOREMENTIONED FOUR POLIS, THERE WERE TWO VILLAGES ON THE ENTIRE PLANET - ONE OF WHICH, HIMUN SOR, WAS PALEY'S BURIAL PLACE. GORDON HAD, AFTER ALL, PLACED A MODEST PLAQUE OUT OF RESPECT FOR THE ADMIRAL. EVEN A SCOUNDREL LIKE HIM FOLLOWED SOME MOST ELEMENTARY RULES.

KENJI CHOSE HIMUN SOR FOR HIS WALK. AND IT WAS THERE THAT HE WALKED THROUGH THE CEMETERY PARK. HE WOULDN'T HAVE NOTICED THE ADMIRAL'S GRAVE BY THE INITIALS ALONE, BUT IT STRUCK HIM THAT IT DIDN'T MATCH THE STYLE OF THE REST OF THE CEMETERY.

KENJI DECIDED TO TAKE A LOOK AROUND. WHAT WAS HIS SURPRISE WHEN HE REALIZED THAT THE BURIED MAN WAS ACTUALLY A

RESIDENT OF ZEGANDARIA. BECAUSE PALEY WASN'T A NAME PECULIAR TO THE LOCAL POPULATION. WHEN HE SAW THE INITIALS 'J. L. PALEY' HE SLAPPED HIMSELF ON THE FOREHEAD. HOW HAD HE NOT THOUGHT OF THAT! IT WAS THE ADMIRAL. BUT WHAT WAS HE DOING HERE?

EVENTUALLY THINGS BEGAN TO SPIRAL OUT OF CONTROL AS HE NOTICED THE STRANGE BEHAVIOR OF THE LOCALS. THEY WERE POINTING FINGERS AT HIM AND WHISPERING TO EACH OTHER. IT WAS BENEATH HIS DIGNITY AS A MILITARY AVIATOR TO TAKE THEM ON, BUT HE COULDN'T IGNORE THEM EITHER. HE DIDN'T SPEAK THE NATIVE TONGUE, THOUGH HE SPOKE MORE THAN TWELVE LANGUAGES, INCLUDING AN INTERGALACTIC DIALECT OF THE STAR FEDERATION THAT UNITED THE PLANETS FROM QUADRANT 0 TO QUADRANT 100. YET THE INHABITANTS OF QUADRANT 175, AND IN PARTICULAR SEBUR NAG, SPOKE A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE ALTOGETHER.

KENJI DECIDED TO EXPLAIN HIMSELF WITH GESTURES. THIS, THOUGH SLIGHTLY UNACCUSTOMED TO HIM, SEEMED THE MOST APPROPRIATE OPTION. HE LEARNED FROM THE LOCALS THAT GORDON ELMBAUM HAD BEEN AT THIS LOCATION AND THAT HE WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR PALEY'S DEATH. OF COURSE ON SEBUR NAG SEVERAL GENERATIONS HAD CHANGED AS WELL, DURING GORDON'S TIME IN THE OTHER DIMENSION. BUT STRANGE WHY THE INHABITANTS OF THIS PLANET STILL CHERISHED THE MEMORY. PERHAPS IT WAS BECAUSE ALIENS CAME HERE RELATIVELY RARELY. OR ALMOST NEVER.

KENJI IMMEDIATELY CONTACTED PENROSE:

- CAPTAIN, I BELIEVE WE'VE HIT A TRAIL. AND THIS TIME IT'S NOT A FAKE.

- 'GO AHEAD, REAR ADMIRAL,' PEROSE MAINTAINED HIS FORMALITY.

- IT SEEMS TO ME THAT OUR FRIEND GOVERNOR ELMBAUM HAS BEEN HERE.

- 'SO FAR SO GOOD,' SAID PENROSE CALMLY.

- 'AND THAT HE KILLED PALEY,' KENJI FINISHED.

HERE PENROSE WAS ALMOST GOING TO SOB. THE GOVERNOR HAD MADE A LOT OF FORWARD MOVES. TOO MANY. APPARENTLY THEY'D MISSED IT, BUT WHILE MAKING THE HYPERSPACE JUMPS, THE DEDUCTED SUBJECTIVE TIME HAD SAVED THEM FROM OBSOLESCENCE AND CERTAIN DEATH. THEY HAD ONLY AGED A FEW SECONDS.

CLEARLY, SEBUR NAG WAS NO LONGER THE PERFECT RESTING PLACE ON THEIR ONWARD JOURNEY TO THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT.

THE INHABITANTS OF HIMUN SOR GRACIOUSLY FED THEM WHAT THEY HAD AND LET THEM GO ON THEIR MERRY WAY.

THE VERY NEXT DAY THEY PREPARED TO LEAVE THE PLANET.

THE WEATHER ON ITS SUPPOSEDLY CALM SURFACE HAD CHANGED. STORMY WINDS BLEW, RUFFLING THE TURBULENT BUT TENDER VEGETATION THAT WAS FOUND THERE. SEBUR NAG WAS MUCH MORE BEAUTIFUL THAN ZEGANDARIA. THEY CALLED IT THE PURPLE PLANET. THERE WERE SO MANY EMERYRIDUM BLOSSOMS HERE, SATURATING THE ATMOSPHERE WITH OXYGEN. SOME EVEN CALLED IT THE PLANET OF NEW HOPE. THE TWO MEN STOOD SHOULDER TO SHOULDER. THEY WANTED TO SAY A FEW WORDS TO EACH OTHER BEFORE HEADING INTO THE ABSOLUTE UNKNOWN.

- 'THAT GORDON HAD KILLED PALEY SO BRUTALLY DID HIM NO HONOR AT ALL. TO STRANGLE YOUR OWN ADMIRAL EXCEEDED NOT ONLY THE BOUNDS OF BAD TASTE, BUT OF HUMAN CONSCIENCE IN GENERAL. THOUGH OBSTINATE, HE HAD NEVER BETRAYED HIM,' PENROSE SAID INDIGNANTLY. A COMMANDER-IN-CHIEF, WHETHER CAPTAIN OR GOVERNOR, SHOULD NEVER HAVE RESORTED TO SUCH METHODS TOWARDS HIS LOYAL MEN. GORDON WAS CLEARLY ALREADY HEADING FOR HIS DOWNFALL. SOMETHING TELLS ME, HOWEVER, THAT THIS STORY IS NOT OVER AT ALL. AND WE HAVEN'T SEEN THE NASTIEST PART OF IT YET.

- 'THE DEATH OF AN INNOCENT CANNOT ATONE FOR YOUR SINS,' KENJI PRONOUNCED WITH AN ICY EXPRESSION. 'THOUGH STRANGERS IN THIS NEW WORLD, WE MUST SEEK IT. IF WE FIND IT, WELL, IF NOT, AT LEAST OUR CONSCIENCE WILL BE CLEAR FOR HAVING TRIED.'

ZORIN APPROACHED. HE HAD OVERHEARD THEIR CONVERSATION.

- AS FAR AS I CAN SEE GORDON IS NO FOOL TO RETURN TO SEBUR NAG. I JUST DON'T TRUST HIM. THE NEXT PLANETS ARE TOO FAR AWAY. AND WHICH ONE IT IS, WE CAN ONLY GUESS,' HE GUESSED.

- 'YOU KNOW, WHILE I'M NOT ALLOWED TO SHARE CLASSIFIED INFORMATION, I'VE HEARD OF THE SO-CALLED ANTIMATTER STASH. IT IS POSSIBLE THAT IN HIS DESPERATION GORDON RESORTED TO IT,' SASIA INTERJECTED.

- 'HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?,' SNIFFED PENROSE. EVEN HE HAD NOT HEARD OF SUCH A SHENANIGAN. HE WAS JUST THE CAPTAIN OF A CONRABAND SHIP UNDER THE MILITARY JURISDICTION OF THE FORMER ZEGANDARIAN HIGH COMMAND. THIS WAS GETTING TOO DELICATE EVEN FOR A MAN LIKE HIM, USED TO SEEING ANYTHING AND EVERYTHING.

- 'WELL, I HAD A MEETING WITH GENERAL ZENGAL,' SASIA STAMMERED.

ZORIN SLAPPED HIMSELF ON THE FOREHEAD.

- 'THERE IS NO SUCH GENERAL IN ALL OF IMGRADON. GORDON HAS SIMPLY TRICKED YOU. 'BUT THERE MAY BE A GRAIN OF TRUTH IN ALL THIS MISINFORMATION,' THE SERGEANT LAUGHED. 'GENERAL ZENGAL, GENERAL ZENGAL. 'GORDON ALWAYS HAD TASTE AND A HIGH LEVEL OF INTELLIGENCE,' HE FINISHED HIS THOUGHTS.'

THE LOCALS HAD NEVER SEEN A SHIP LIKE THE EMZIROU, SO THE NEWCOMERS LOOKED LIKE GODS TO THEM. GODS THAT HAD COME BRIEFLY TO THEIR FUNNY LITTLE PLANET THAT THEY LOVED SO MUCH BECAUSE THEY HAD NEVER LEFT IT.

- 'HOW ABOUT WE TAKE SOMEONE WITH US,' SUGGESTED LINUS, CAPTAIN PENROSE'S CRAZIEST CREW MEMBER. 'WE'LL HAVE SOME REAL MUSIC ON BOARD. REAL FIDDLE PEOPLE. WELL ALMOST.'

- 'E, LINUS, ONLY YOU COULD COME UP WITH SUCH A CRAZY IDEA. 'DEFINITELY CRAZY,' CAPTAIN PENROSE PATTED HIM ON THE BACK.

A LITTLE LATER, THE EMZIROU WAS GETTING READY TO TAKE OFF. BUT THEN SOMETHING UNEXPECTED HAPPENED.

ONE OF THE FIDDLE MEN APPROACHED AND CONFIDENTIALLY SAID TO THEM:

- THIS IS A RECORDING FROM ADMIRAL PALEY, GIVE IT TO US FOR SAFEKEEPING IN CASE YOU EVER PASS BY HERE.

- 'WE'LL BE SURE TO LOOK IT OVER,' KENJI CALLED BACK, CAREFULLY TUCKING IT AWAY.

NOW THEY REALLY COULD LEAVE. 'THE EMZIROU LEFT THE ATMOSPHERE OF OSONIA AND HEADED INTO THE TRUE UNKNOWN, BEYOND THE SO-CALLED FIRST RING OF THE OUTER ASTEROID BELT. THE ASTEROID BELT IN QUESTION STRETCHED ACROSS A DIAMETER OF HUNDREDS OF THOUSANDS OF LIGHT YEARS, AND WAS SOMETHING TRULY IMPRESSIVE. SOME CLAIMED THAT IT WAS FORMED BY FAILED ATTEMPTS TO FORM PLANETS, BUT NO ONE HAD FULLY EXPLORED IT DUE TO ITS EXTRAORDINARILY HUGE SIZE.

- 'LET'S HEAR THE RECORDING THOUGH,' ZORIN SUGGESTED. 'IT MIGHT BE HELPFUL.'

- 'LOOKS LIKE WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TROUBLE REPRODUCING IT,' KENJI, WHO WAS A SPACE ENGINEER FIRST-CLASS, WAS ALSO A LITTLE NERVOUS. 'THE TECHNOLOGY SEEMS A LITTLE DATED, BUT WE'LL MANAGE.'

SUDDENLY, EVERYTHING STARTED TO SOUND TOO CLEAR.

'YOU WHO ARE LISTENING TO THIS RECORDING MADE SHORTLY BEFORE I DIED SHOULD BE VERY CAREFUL. GORDON ELMBAUM IS

NOT ONLY A SCOUNDREL, BUT MUCH MORE DANGEROUS THAN I THOUGHT. HE IS INDEED GUILTY OF ALL THE CRIMES OF ZEGANDARIA, SOMETHING THAT PERHAPS MANY ALREADY KNOW NO WORSE THAN I. BUT I HAVE ALSO DISCOVERED SOMETHING THAT MAY BE OF USE TO ALL THOSE AFTER ME WHO CHOOSE TO HOLD HIM TO ACCOUNT. GORDON DOES NOT RELY ON ORDINARY TIME JUMPS, WHERE ONLY SO-CALLED SUBJECTIVE TIME ACCUMULATES, IN HIS ATTEMPT TO ESCAPE. HE HAS A MUCH DEEPER IDEA. HE WANTS TO CONNECT WITH THE HIGHER MIND RUNNING THE UNIVERSE, OR THE SO-CALLED UNIVERSAL VOICE. I BELIEVE THAT EVEN AN ARTIST LIKE GORDON CANNOT FOOL THE VERY CREATOR OF OUR UNIVERSE. BUT, WHAT WAS MY AMAZEMENT WHEN I DISCOVERED THAT CHRIS ZONRETHIS, NEVER EXISTED, BUT WAS JUST A HIGHLY EVOLVED ANDROID WHO CARRIED A PART OF GORDON'S MIND IN HIS OWN HEAD. I KNOW IT SOUNDS CRAZY TO YOU, BUT GORDON NEVER SEPARATED FROM CHRIS SIMPLY BECAUSE GORDON AND CHRIS ARE THE SAME THING, OR MORE ACCURATELY, BECAUSE THEY SHARE A COMMON CONSCIOUSNESS IN PART. GORDON HAS COMPARTMENTALIZED THAT KNOWLEDGE WHICH HE WILL NEED AFTER HIS SO-CALLED TALK WITH THE HIGHER MIND. HE INTENDS TO MAKE USE OF THE SO-CALLED ANTI-TREMES TO REJUVENATE HIMSELF SUFFICIENTLY, SINCE THE FEATHERS OF THE ARCHANAANS ARE UNABLE TO KEEP HIM HEALTHY AND VITAL FOR MUCH LONGER. THEY ONLY RELIEVE HIM. HOW DO I KNOW THIS, YOU ASK? WHEN GORDON ANNOUNCED AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THE THREE, THEY REMOVED THE NARENZIAN CHIPS FROM OUR HEADS. THEN THEY WIRED US UP WITH SPECIAL HYON CHIPS - JUST LIKE THE HYON FILAMENTS, THEY ISOLATE NOISES FROM THE OUTSIDE ENVIRONMENT AND WE CAN COMMUNICATE WITH EACH OTHER THROUGH A TELEPATHIC LINK. YOU HEARD RIGHT. GORDON HAS REASSURED HIMSELF THAT IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO HIM, HE CAN LIVE ON THROUGH ME OR CHRIS UNTIL HIS CONSCIOUSNESS IS TRANSFERRED TO A STABLE MEDIUM. EVEN IF THAT DOESN'T STRIKE YOU AS AN UNPRECEDENTED MIRACLE, SINCE IT'S STILL VERY POSSIBLE THAT SOMETHING COULD HAPPEN TO HIM, GORDON HAS ALSO TAKEN ANOTHER REALLY ODD MEASURE. HE'S INVITING HIMSELF TO TRANSFER THE REMAINING PIECES OF HIS OWN

MIND AND THOUGHTS TO THE SURVIVING ARCHANIANs, AND WILL ARRANGE FOR THEIR RETURN TO ZEGANDARIA. YOU HEARD ME RIGHT. EVEN IF SOMEONE OR SOMETHING EVER SURVIVES AND RETURNS TO MY HOME PLANET, THEY WILL NOT LEAVE IT ALIVE. GORDON'S HATRED WILL HAUNT HIM EVEN FROM THE GRAVE. HOWEVER, WHEN I DEFIED HIS PLANS, I WAS MET WITH HIS VIOLENT REACTION. GORDON NEVER FORGIVES STUBBORNNESS. THAT'S WHY HE CHANGES HIS SKIN LIKE A CHAMELEON EVERY TIME, BUT HE SURVIVES. END OF RECORDING! MADE IN THE THIRD QUARTER OF THE LUNAR CYCLE OF SEBUR NAG YEAR 293475 OF THE CYCLO TO CALENDAR, SUPREME LEADER OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE PLANET.'

THE RECORDING WAS FURTHER CORRUPTED. THERE MAY WELL HAVE BEEN SOME MORE IMPORTANT INFORMATION, BUT OBVIOUSLY IT WOULD NOT SEE THE LIGHT OF DAY. THIS MAY WELL HAVE BEEN DONE QUITE DELIBERATELY, AS PALEY, UNDER THE MUZZLE OF THE PLASMA WEAPONS, WAS MADE TO SPEAK WHAT PLEASED HIS MORE POWERFUL PARTNER.

- INTERESTING PLANS THIS GORDON HAS. CLEARLY HIS POWER IS GROWING. HE'S ALREADY MAKING A NAME FOR HIMSELF AS A UNIVERSAL FACTOR,' ZORIN STROKED HIS CHIN. HE PLAYS ROLES, BUT WHEN ONE OF HIS MANY GUISES AND INCARNATIONS IS BROKEN INTO A THOUSAND PIECES, LIKE A MIRROR, HE WILL LOSE HIS BEARINGS AND BECOME VULNERABLE. WHAT HE'S DONE, BY THE WAY, ISN'T ALL THAT IMPRESSIVE, BUT I'M AMAZED AT HOW MANY DIFFERENT BACKUPS HE'S PREPARED AHEAD OF TIME.

- 'CHECK THE RECORD TO SEE IF IT'S REAL. DON'T SEND US FOR GREEN SPAWN LIKE WITH THE NON-EXISTENT GENERAL ZENGAL,' SASIA ADDED CAUSTICALLY.

- 'WE HAVE A SMALL LAB ON THIS SHIP FOR CHECKING SUCH COMMUNICATION RECORDS,' PENROSE JOINED IN. - 'WE'LL EVEN GO OVER IT A FEW TIMES JUST IN CASE. NOW LET'S CALCULATE HOW MUCH SUBJECTIVE TIME WILL ACCUMULATE ON THE NEXT TIME JUMP TO CALISTRO 325 IN THE CICADA CONSTELLATION IN STELLAR QUADRANT 415.'

- THIS IS TOO DELICATE BECAUSE WE ARE COUNTING ON REPLENISHING OUR FUEL SUPPLY FROM THE SMALL REFINERY OF THE FAKE ASTEROID, WHICH MAY BE LONG GONE AND THERE IS ABSOLUTELY NOTHING IN PLACE AT THESE COORDINATES.

- 'THERE MAY STILL BE SURVIVING PRISONERS OUT THERE SOMEWHERE,' SASIA HOPED.

- 'I DON'T THINK SO,' KENJI DARED TO CONTRADICT HER. 'TOO MANY JUMPS MAKES SUCH A THING A VENTURE WITH A FOREGONE CONCLUSION. BUT IF YOU'RE SO INSISTENT, WE COULD SET THOSE COORDINATES.'

EMSIRU SWITCHED ON HIS QUANTUM STABILIZERS. AND ENTERED A PREPARATORY PHASE FOR MAKING A HYPERSPACE JUMP.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: THE CYCLO TO

- THIS ANDROID MIGHT AS WELL HAVE KILLED ZORIN. BUT YOU DROPPED IT. YOU FAILED WHEN IT WAS IN YOUR HANDS, AND YOU MISSED A UNIQUE OPPORTUNITY - ITS OWNER'S VOICE WAS SIMPLY FURIOUS.

HIS FACE WAS STILL NOWHERE TO BE SEEN. BUT THE SHADOW CAST OVER HIM WAS OMINOUS.

- CHRIS, YOU ARE MY OTHER SELF. I WILL NEVER BECOME GOOD, NO MATTER WHAT THOSE FOOLS ON OSONIA THINK. A PLANET HIDING MY RICHES, TOO FAR FROM BOTH ZEGANDARIA AND THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT.

- 'I'M SORRY, GOVERNOR. THAT IS ALL I CAN SAY. I CAN ONLY REGRET THAT HE CAME TO HIS SENSES BEFORE BRAIN DEATH OVERTOOK HIM. 'WE'VE LOST AN EXPENSIVE ANDROID,' ZONRETHIS REPLIED.



- ZORIN'S TOO SMART. MUCH BETTER THAN ALL THE OTHERS PUT TOGETHER. AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS SUBJECT. BUT THERE'S SOMETHING THAT DEFINITELY NEEDS TO BE SAID. HE IS NOT, AND NEVER WILL BE, HAPPY WITH THE WAY THINGS ARE GOING. HE KNEW HE HAD A TRAITOR. THE TRAITOR WAS KEITH ENDWALKER, OF ALL PEOPLE. BUT MOST LIKELY NO ONE SENSED IT. HE WAS ALSO MARK'S FRIEND, GOT SOMEWHAT UNDER THE SKIN OF SASIA, ELIZANDRA'S SPY PROTÉGÉ, EVEN MANAGED TO TRICK THE NICE JACOB WALLACE. HE'S ON THE SHIP WITH THEM NOW TOO I GUESS. NATURALLY WE CAN'T COMMUNICATE, BUT WE HAVE EVERY REAL REASON TO COUNT ON HIM TO BRING THEM DOWN FROM THE INSIDE. OSONIA WILL WASH MY FACE, WHICH HAS LONG FELT SICK AND SLACK.

- GOVERNOR, I'VE NEVER HEARD YOU TALK LIKE THAT. LOOK, CHRIS, THE IMPLANTATION OF MEMORIES WAS TO SOME EXTENT WRONG. I DON'T SAY THIS OUT OF SCRUPLES, BECAUSE YOU KNOW DAMN WELL I DON'T HAVE THEM, BUT WHAT SANE PERSON WOULD CHOOSE BAD MEMORIES FOR THEMSELVES? FEW OF US COULD BE LIKE THAT. FEW OF US COULD RESIST THE PRESSURE. SO MANY DIFFERENT PROBLEMS. SO MANY HARD FATES. EVERYONE THOUGHT I WAS A MONSTER. BUT THIS MONSTER HAS SERVED FIVE FULL TERMS, MAKING TWENTY-FIVE ZEGANDARIAN YEARS. THIS CITY WAS IN MUCH WORSE SHAPE BEFORE I TOOK OVER, BUT PEOPLE HAVE SHORT MEMORIES.

- 'GOVERNOR, WHAT ARE WE TO DO ABOUT CYCLO TO, THE SUPREME LEADER OF SEBUR NAG?', INQUIRED ZONRETHIS.

- 'THAT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY. AT THE MOMENT, OSONIA IS LITERALLY TYING ME TO LIFE. CYCLO TO IS A WARLORD MINDSET, BUT HE WILL NEVER HAVE A GALACTIC, LET ALONE A UNIVERSAL MINDSET. IT'S JUST CONVENIENT TO MANIPULATE. WE'LL GO BACK TO SEBUR NAG FOR SUPPORT,' THE GOVERNOR CONTINUED CALMLY.

- 'SO IT'S ALL JUST THEATRE AGAIN?', ASKED THE CONGRESSMAN, WHO WAS AN ANDROID BUT HAD NEVER BEEN AWARE OF THAT FACT. HE WAS PROGRAMMED THAT WAY. GORDON GUARDED IT LIKE THE APPLE OF HIS EYE. AND THERE WAS A REASON WHY.

- FOR NOW, YES. I SUSPECT THAT SOMEONE OTHER THAN THOSE WHO WERE ALREADY ON THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET MIGHT HAVE FOLLOWED ON OUR HEELS. WE MUST BE CAREFUL. THIS IS SOMETHING TOO SERIOUS TO BE GROPING THROUGH FINGERS. SOONER OR LATER, THEY'RE GOING TO DROP IN ON SEBUR NAG. SOME OF THEM MIGHT MAKE IT TO OSONIA. I DON'T BELIEVE WE CAN FOOL THE UNIVERSAL VOICE, BUT WE CAN AT LEAST SETTLE SCORES OVER THE HALF-LOST WAR WITH UBUNDER.

- 'HOW DID IT START?,' THE CONGRESSMAN ASKED.

JACOB KNEW OF OUR PLANS TO COMBINE PRODUCTION ON BOTH HALVES OF THE PLANET. SYNTHROS WAS A SMALL OBSTACLE, BUT I WOULD NEVER, ON ANY OCCASION, ALLOW MYSELF TO SIMPLY START A WAR LIGHTLY OUT OF GREED OR A LUST FOR POWER. I WANTED PEACE AND TRANQUILITY, BUT I WANTED THE AUTONOMOUS RULE OF SYNTHROS TO BE ABOLISHED SO THAT I COULD TRADE FREELY WITH THE INTERGALACTIC FEDERATION. THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN, OF COURSE. UBUNDER HAS ALWAYS HAD A PARTICULARLY CLEAR AND PRECISE SENSE OF MORALITY. EXTREMELY UNPLEASANT, BUT A FACT. IT'S SO HARD TO TELL RIGHT FROM WRONG SOMETIMES. BUT EVEN FOR THAT, I STILL WOULDN'T START THE WAR. JACOB WALLACE WAS AN AUTHORITY. HE WAS ALWAYS THE BETTER AND MORE PREPARED OF THE TWO. I WOULDN'T BE SURPRISED IF HE HELPED THEM GET TO ME SOMEHOW.

- 'BUT I FEEL LIKE YOU'RE STILL NOT TELLING ME SOMETHING,' THE CONGRESSMAN COUNTERED.

- YOU KNOW ME PRETTY WELL, CHRIS. WHAT HAPPENED TO ME WAS ACTUALLY QUITE DANGEROUS. I LOST MY ONLY SON.

- 'AND WHAT'S HIS NAME?,' THE CONGRESSMAN ASKED HIM AGAIN.

- 'VIAR,' WAS ELMBAUM'S TERSE REPLY. 'I HEARD HE HAD A SON, THOUGH HE NEVER SAW HIM. I WAS FED UP. BECAUSE OF THESE PROBLEMS, I HAD TO SEND HIM AS A REGULAR SUPERINTENDENT TO LABOR COLONY 206.'

- 'WHY AS AN ORDINARY?,' THE CONGRESSMAN CONTINUED. 'SO YOU HELD ALL THE POWER!'

- HE NEVER SAW ME. I SENT HIM TO AN ORDINARY FARMER. HE THINKS HE IS HIS FATHER. IN FACT I HAVE NEVER SEEN HIM OR MY GRANDSON, WHICH IS RATHER SAD.

- 'AND WHAT IS YOUR GRANDSON'S NAME?,' THE CONGRESSMAN CONTINUED WITH HIS QUESTIONS.

- 'HE IS A TECHNICAL GENIUS. HIS NAME IS DISLAN,' THE GOVERNOR REPLIED SIMPLY.

- 'ANDREW DISLAN?,' GASPED ZONRETHIS.

- 'EXACTLY,' REPLIED ELMBAUM. 'THEN HE WAS ON THE SPACE SECOND RING TO KEEP IT SAFE BEFORE THE WAR BROKE OUT.'

- 'THEN IT ALL SEEMS MUCH MORE PROSAIC,' SIGHED ZONRETHIS. 'AND ULTRA CITY?'

- AGAIN, JACOB'S STUPID SHENANIGANS. HE WAS FIRMLY OF THE OPINION THAT IT WAS A GOOD AND PROPER WAY TO CREATE STABILITY AND BALANCE IN RELATIONS BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES. SOMETHING I'M FAR FROM SURE OF. ULTRA CITY NEVER REALLY EXISTED. IT WAS ACTUALLY A HYPERSPACE ANOMALY THAT WAS CONVENIENT FOR US.

- 'AND ALL THE RUMORS ABOUT IT BEING A NEUTRAL CITY-STATE?,' ASKED ZONRETHIS AGAIN.

- 'THAT WAS NONSENSE. WHEN YOU REPEAT A LIE A THOUSAND TIMES, IT BECOMES THE TRUTH,' GORDON CONTINUED HIS REASONING, 'BUT ONE THING IS ABSOLUTELY TRUE. NOT A WORD CAN BE SAID WHEN WE SPEAK OF THE ARCHANA-EANS AS OBSERVERS OF OUR CIVILISATION. THEY PERFORMED EVERYTHING EXACTLY.

- 'WHAT NEXT?,' STILL CHRIS ZONRETHIS ASKED HIM.

- 'HONESTLY, NOT MUCH,' ELMBAUM SAID, A LITTLE SADLY. 'I'M SICK OF FIGHTING AND WARS FOR STUPID SUPREMACY. BUT THAT'S LIFE. EITHER YOU EAT THEM OR THEY EAT YOU.'

- 'AND WHAT HAS BECOME OF YOUR ADJUTANT ISONGDAR?,' ASKED ZONRETHIS.

- 'IF HE BETRAYED PALEY, HE'D BETRAY ME. WE LEFT HIS CORPSE ON SEBUR NAG UNDER A ROCK. HIS AMBITION DESTROYED HIM. AND THERE WERE SOME GOOD POINTS THAT COULD HAVE HELPED US IN THE MOMENT,' ELMBAUM SIGHED. 'WHEN WE LET SOMEONE GET TOO CLOSE, THEY JUST TAKE ADVANTAGE OF OUR KINDNESS. THAT IS. BUT AT LEAST NO ONE WILL FIND HIM THERE. I'M SURE. LET HIM LIE STILL. ON THE OTHER HAND, AREA NINE WHERE WE DID THE GENE EXPERIMENTS WAS ALSO A BIG MISTAKE. NOW AT LEAST SOME SECRETS MIGHT NOT COME OUT EVEN IF WE GET CAUGHT.'

- 'LET'S HOPE WE DON'T STAY ON THIS PLANET TOO LONG,' ZONRETHIS ADDED. 'THAT WAY THE RISK PURE AND SIMPLE INCREASES.'

THE CONVERSATION WAS TAKING PLACE ON ONE OF THE WELL ISOLATED DOCKS OF OSONIA. ZONRETHIS HAD RENTED IT FOR A HUGE SUM OF MONEY AND NOW THEY WERE LIVING THERE. IT WAS JUST QUITE BEAUTIFUL TO OBSERVE THE ATMOSPHERE OF THE PLANET THROUGH THE THICK DOME OF ENDOSIAN. IT WAS UNFORGETTABLE. THE ATMOSPHERE WAS INTIMATE - LIKE BETWEEN OLD FRIENDS. THEY KNEW THE DENOUEMENT WAS COMING VERY SOON. IT WAS A MATTER OF TIME BEFORE THEY FOUND THEM.

^^^

GORDON KNEW THAT TIME WAS RUNNING OUT, SO HE AND CHRIS DECIDED TO GO TO CYCLO TO, WHO WAS, AMONG OTHER THINGS, THE SUPREME ORACLE OF THE PLANET SEBUR NAG. THEY BOOKED ONE OF THE PRIVATE SPEEDERS, INACCESSIBLE TO THE ORDINARY COMMONERS OF OSONIA, AND SET OFF, HEAVILY GUARDED BY HALF

A PLATOON OF OSONIAN MERCENARIES. THE BEAUTIFUL MOUNTAIN RANGES, COVERED IN SOME SEMBLANCE OF SNOW THAT WAS ACTUALLY MORE LIKE FROZEN METHANE, WERE DEFINITELY EYE CATCHING. THE WHOLE PLANET WAS QUITE PECULIAR, BUT THEREIN LAY ITS CHARM. THERE WAS NO AVOIDING THE ENCOUNTER THAT WAS ABOUT TO TAKE PLACE. CYCLO TO WOULD GIVE THEM THE ANSWERS, OR AT LEAST HE COULD TELL THEM WHAT TO DO. THE JOURNEY WAS GOING TO TAKE SEVERAL LEAPS OF SUBJECTIVE TIME. THE JOURNEY WASN'T THE MOST APPEALING THING, BUT THEY WERE GIVING IT THEIR BEST TO WITHSTAND THE PRESSURE.

CYCLO TO HAD THE STATUS OF A DEITY OF THE NATIVE SEBUR NAG. NO ONE COULD CHALLENGE ITS AUTHORITY AND NO MERE MORTAL COULD APPROACH IT. BUT IT WAS TERRIBLY DEPENDENT ON GORDON, AT LEAST FINANCIALLY. THE GOVERNOR HAD MADE HIM A PUPPET WHO WAS PRACTICALLY A HOSTAGE TO HIS OWN PLANS. THIS SUITED HIM CONSIDERABLY. NO MATTER WHAT, THERE WERE TOO MANY PEOPLE WHO NEEDED TO BE BOUGHT OFF BY HIM. HE'D RATHER JUST BUY ONE AND KEEP THE OTHERS THROUGH HIM. IT WAS A SOMEWHAT WINNING STRATEGY. BUT GORDON HAD ALREADY BEGUN TO BEND, OR RATHER EXTERNAL CIRCUMSTANCES WERE ABOUT TO DO THAT TO HIM.

SOMEWHERE DEEP IN HIS HEART, HE KNEW THAT CHRIS WAS COMING WITH HIM OUT OF OBLIGATION, SIMPLY BECAUSE THE FATES OF THE TWO WERE LINKED BY A COMMON CAUSE. THERE WAS NO OTHER REAL EXPLANATION FOR IT.

THE SEBUR NAG HAD BEEN WARNED IN GOOD TIME OF THE GOVERNOR'S VISIT AND HAD MADE PREPARATIONS. SOMETHING THAT WAS TO BE EXPECTED.

CYCLO TO POSSESSED SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES CAPABLE OF GENERATING BRAINWAVES AND MOTIVATING EACH OF HIS SUBJECTS TO DO CERTAIN THINGS OF HIS OWN VOLITION. WITH THIS, HE CONTROLLED THE ENTIRE POPULATION OF THE PLANET SEBUR NAG.

HE WAS NOT PARTICULARLY MORAL OR BENEVOLENT IN HIS RULE, LET ALONE CALM, BUT ABOVE ALL HE WANTED TO SHOW TO HIMSELF THAT HE WAS CAPABLE OF WITHSTANDING PRESSURE.

THERE, SOMEWHERE IN HIS HEART, HE HAD LOST THE THREAD OF HIS FEELINGS AND FELT THE PAIN OF FAILURE AND THE SUBSEQUENT DOOM ASSOCIATED WITH IT. HE HAD TO HOLD AND STABILIZE HIS POWER. AND GORDON WAS HIS ONLY ALLY.

THE TWO OF THEM FIXED THEIR EYES ON EACH OTHER. THEY WERE USED TO UNDERSTANDING EACH OTHER WITHOUT UNNECESSARY TALK, EVEN THOUGH GORDON DID NOT SPEAK THE DIALECT OF SEBURNAG AND NEEDED AN INTERPRETER. THEY HAD WORKED OUT THEIR OWN SYMBOLIC LANGUAGE TO AVOID OUTSIDE INTERFERENCE IN THEIR CONVERSATION. IT WAS A SPECIAL MOMENT IN THEIR LIVES.

CHRIS WAS IN THE ROLE OF CONFRERE, BUT IN FOREIGN TERRITORY. HE WAS TRYING TO BE AS COOPERATIVE AS POSSIBLE.

- 'SO, GORDON, THEY'VE GOT YOU ALL OVER THE PLACE NOW, EH?,' ASKED CYCLO TO IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS.

- 'SO IT SEEMS, AND THE OPTIONS SEEM TO BE RUNNING OUT,' THE GOVERNOR REPLIED, A LITTLE RETICENTLY.

- 'DEATH ISN'T THE SCARIEST THING, MY DEAR FELLOW,' THE SEBURNAG TURNED TO HIM MORE CHEERFULLY. 'THERE ARE FAR MORE TERRIBLE AND AWFUL THINGS. FOR INSTANCE, HAVING NOWHERE QUITE TO GO. DO YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT I AM SAYING?'

- 'DO YOU BELIEVE IN REINCARNATION?,' ASKED GORDON.

- 'LEAVE THAT NONSENSE ALONE,' CYCLO TO COUNTERED.

- 'I NEED SOME MORE TIME,' GORDON APOLOGISED.

- AS LONG AS IT TAKES, YOU'LL HAVE IT, BUT NO MORE THAN TWO WEEKS. YOU NEED TO FIND A SOLUTION TO YOUR PROBLEM BY THEN. ALREADY A LOT OF PEOPLE ARE ASKING ABOUT YOU. I CAN'T HIDE

YOU FOREVER. AND I HAVE MY OWN PROBLEMS,' THE SEBURNAG TOLD HIM, A LITTLE NERVOUSLY.

CHRIS DID HIS BEST TO LIGHTEN THE ATMOSPHERE. THE THREE OF THEM WALKED OUT TO A SPACIOUS TERRACE COVERED IN ENDOSIAN. EVERYTHING WAS VISIBLE ON IT. THE 'PLANET OF NEW HOPES' COULD HAVE BEEN THE PLANET OF NEW NIGHTMARES. THIS GORDON UNDERSTOOD ONLY TOO WELL.

HE HAD TO GET BACK TO OSONIA AND GET READY FOR A FIGHT OF HIS OWN.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: THE SWARM

THE MYERANIAN THREAT THAT NO ONE SUSPECTED WAS ALREADY APPROACHING SEBUR NAG. THE MYERANIANS HAD ORGANIZED THEIR SWARM. THEY FIGURED THEY COULD ATTACH THEMSELVES UNDETECTED TO A SMALL TRANSPORT FLEET OF SHIPS NEAR KIKLUK SOR, THE BORDER PLANET BEYOND THE HUNDREDTH QUADRANT THAT EVERYONE WAS TRYING TO AVOID. MIERU REMEMBERED WELL WHAT HE WANTED TO ACCOMPLISH. SEBUR NAG WAS THE 'PLANET OF NEW HOPES.' THOUGH PARASITIC, HER RACE WOULD HAVE TO BE MUCH MORE RESTRAINED AND RESPONSIBLE IN THE NEW PLACE TO ENSURE THEIR SURVIVAL. IT WOULD NOT HAVE INDISCRIMINATELY DESTROYED RESOURCES, AT LEAST AT FIRST, WITHOUT BEING SURE IT WOULD FIND A NEW LOCATION. THAT MUCH WAS CLEAR. IT WAS SO FRIGHTENING TO THINK THAT ALL OF THESE CREATURES WERE CONFINED TO THEIR NUNDRIGO, EACH SHIP HOUSING UP TO FIVE HUNDRED OF THE LITTLE CREATURES. IN STATURE THEY WERE ALL LIKE MIERU AND LOOKED LIKE CHILDREN. MAYBE THEY SHOULD HAVE USED THEIR SUPER-ADVANCED VILLERIA CANNONS TO TAKE HER OVER. HOWEVER, THAT WOULD BE A DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD. FIRST, THEY HAD NO WAY OF KNOWING FOR SURE WHAT FORCES WERE DEPLOYED ON SEBUR NAG. AND SECOND, AND MUCH MORE

IMPORTANT, THEIR FLEET WAS RELATIVELY SMALL TO DEPLOY AN ALL-OUT WAR. TRUE, THERE WERE HUNDREDS OF SHIPS STATIONED IN THE IMMENSELY LONG TUNNELS BENEATH THE CRYPT THAT THIS RACE HAD BEEN BUILDING FOR DECADES, CLEVERLY CONCEALING THEIR EXISTENCE THROUGH HUGE BRIBES TO GOVERNOR ELMBAUM. FOR ALMOST THIRTY YEARS THEY HAD BEEN SILENTLY BUILDING THEIR PLAN. THEY KNEW ABOUT THE CORRUPT GOVERNOR, WHO WAS THEIR ONLY CHANCE TO LEAVE THEM ALONE WHILE THEY GATHERED THE STRENGTH TO SURVIVE. THERE WAS NO OTHER WAY TO ACHIEVE IT. AND THE MYERANIANS WERE RICH AND HELD ALL THE NEAR-PLANET TRADE THROUGH THE GOVERNOR NATURALLY. HE REGULARLY REPORTED A PERCENTAGE OF ALL PROFITS TO THEM. IF HE HAD SCREWED THEM, THEY WOULD HAVE KILLED HIM INSTANTLY WITHOUT A THOUGHT. EVEN GORDON WASN'T THAT BRAZEN. OR RATHER STUPID. THEY'D HEARD ABOUT HIS ESCAPE ON SEBUR NAG FROM THEIR OWN SOURCES, BUT THEY HADN'T EVEN SUSPECTED HE'D MADE IT ALL THE WAY TO OSONIA. THEY HAD NEVER HEARD OF THIS PLANET.

GORDON HAD TAKEN THEM INTO ACCOUNT WHEN HE HAD SET OUT TO ESCAPE. THE SWARM HAD APPROACHED SEBUR NAG AT A SAFE DISTANCE.

MIERU ORDERED THEM TO LOOK AROUND A BIT BEFORE DOING ANYTHING. HER SWARM WOULD NOT BE SACRIFICED IN COMBAT FOR ANYTHING OR ANYONE. ANYTHING COULD GO WRONG. AND SHE HAD ALREADY ATTACKED ENOUGH. AS THE SAYING WENT WHEN YOU HIT A HIVE WITH BEES, THEY COULD STING YOU.

SEBUR NAG SEEMED CALM AND BY NO INDICATION HE HAD SENSED THE APPROACHING DANGER.

THE SWARM HAD THE TIME IT NEEDED TO REGROUP AND BE LEVEL IN FENDING OFF ANY RESISTANCE FROM THE SEBURNAGIANS.

THE HUGE FLEET, INCLUDING OVER THREE HUNDRED NUNDRIGO, WAS ABOUT TO LAUNCH THE ATTACK.



MIERU WANTED TO PRESERVE THE PLANET'S RESOURCES, NOT DESTROY IT MERCILESSLY, AS THEIR FLEET HAD NOWHERE TO GO AFTERWARDS. MAYBE GORDON WAS HERE AT THE MOMENT.

THE VILLERIA CANNONS THE LITTLE GUYS HAD COULD EASILY EVEN CAUSE AN INTERNAL IMPLOSION OF THE PLANET IN JUST TWO OR THREE HOURS OF AIMED FIRE. THE MYERANIANS USUALLY AVOIDED USING THESE FEARSOME WEAPONS, AS THE END OF THE BATTLE IN SUCH A CASE WAS A FOREGONE CONCLUSION.

THE LITTLE QUEEN DIDN'T WANT IT THAT WAY. SHE ORDERED HER FAITHFUL ADMIRAL KAT' NOR MUS TO MAKE AND COST, BUT TO GET AS CLOSE AS POSSIBLE TO THE PLANET TO GET A CLOSER LOOK AT IT. A SMALL NUMBER OF SCOUT SHIPS - MORTS - HAD BEEN DROPPED INTO THE HIGH EXOSPHERE AND WOULD, ON A SET SIGNAL, BE PUT INTO A FREE FALL THAT WOULD TAKE AT LEAST HALF A DAY. THEY KNEW THAT THE MORTS WOULD NOT INITIALLY ATTRACT ANYONE'S ATTENTION. A LITTLE LATER, HOWEVER, THE EVARICEAN ANTI-RADAR SYSTEMS WOULD STILL INTERCEPT THEM AND DESTROY AT LEAST SOME OF THEM. MIERU DIDN'T RELY ON THEM TOO MUCH. THEIR GOAL WAS TO INSTILL PANIC AND SHOW THAT THEY WERE FINALLY GOING TO HAVE THEIR OWN PLANET TO SETTLE ON UNDISTURBED BY ANY OTHER RACE.

MIERU WAS COUNTING ON DROPPING LITTLE KILLER COCOONS, AS THEY CALLED THEIR EQUIVALENT OF HUMAN ESONIAN BOMBS, THAT WOULD BURROW DEEP BENEATH THE PLANET'S SURFACE AND CAUSE MODERATE EARTH TREMORS THAT WOULD STARTLE THE NATIVES. IT WASN'T GOING TO BE EASY TO MAKE SOME PREPARATIONS BECAUSE THE ONES THEY HAD WERE VERY LIMITED IN QUANTITY. SHE DECIDED TO ACT PROFESSIONALLY AND NOT RUSH INTO RELEASING ALL OF THEM. THE SHIPS HAD SCANNED SOME SMALL CAVERNS ON THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET WHERE THE COCOONS IN QUESTION, COULD FALL AND BE USED IF NEEDED, EVEN IN A GROUND ASSAULT OF A HUNDRED AND FIFTY THOUSAND SMALL MYERANIANS.

SOMEHOW ALL THIS HAD SHARPENED EVERYONE'S NERVES TO THE LIMIT. THIS WAS HAPPENING ACCORDING TO A PRECONCEIVED SCENARIO THAT HAD BEEN WORKED OUT BY THEM FOR YEARS.

CYCLO TO AND GORDON WERE STILL ON THE TERRACE AND THE GOVERNOR WAS JUST ABOUT TO LEAVE WHEN THEY SAW SOMETHING IN THE SKY THAT LOOKED LIKE FIREWORKS. GORDON ALMOST IMMEDIATELY SENSED THAT IT WAS NOT HIS OLD ACQUAINTANCES SPEARS AND ELISANDRA, BUT SOME OF HIS FORMER VASSAL ALLIES THAT HE HAD TO DEAL WITH ONCE AND FOR ALL. HOWEVER, THE PROBLEM WAS THAT THINGS WEREN'T AS COMFORTABLE HERE ON SEBUR NAG AS THEY WERE ON OSONIA. HIS RICHES WERE LOCKED UP RIGHT THERE, AND SO WERE MOST OF THE PEOPLE HE HAD AT HIS DISPOSAL.

- SOMETHING WE NEVER EVEN EXPECTED WAS BEGINNING, GORDON. 'BE CAREFUL THAT WAVE DOESN'T SWEEP US AWAY!' THE SOVEREIGN VOICED HIS CONCERNS.

- 'I'VE ALWAYS SLIPPED UP SO FAR, MATE,' GORDON COUNTERED, 'AND I KNOW ONLY TOO WELL THAT WE'RE BOTH IN THIS GAME TOGETHER. I'M SURE YOU REMEMBER IT TOO WELL. SOMEWHERE DOWN THERE SOMEONE'S COMING FOR MY HEAD. WANTS IT ON A PLATTER. AND HE BELIEVES HE'D BE A BETTER MANAGER THAN ME. BUT MAYBE HE'S WRONG!'

CYCLO TO DIDN'T ANSWER. HALF-TURNED TO HIS INTERLOCUTOR, HE SENSED THE HIDDEN THREAT. GORDON HAD NOT PROVED A PARTICULARLY LUCRATIVE PARTY, NOT BECAUSE HE HAD NOT BENEFITED ENORMOUSLY FROM IT OVER THE YEARS, BUT SIMPLY BECAUSE IN HIS LUST FOR GRANDOMANIA HE HAD SET TOO MANY PEOPLE AGAINST HIM. THIS MADE HIM AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS ALLY.

CYCLO TO MENTALLY RAN THROUGH OPTIONS ON HOW TO GET OUT OF THE SITUATION IN THE BEST WAY POSSIBLE. AND IT WAS TRYING TO REORGANIZE ITS OWN RESOURCES, BUT IT WOULDN'T HAVE ENOUGH TIME TO ACT. THEN IT DECIDED ON A DESPERATE ACT.

AAA

TO BE FAIR, MIERU DIDN'T HATE THE GOVERNOR. SHE JUST DIDN'T LIKE HIS APPROACH. HE WAS MORE RELAXED IN HIS DEALINGS WITH HIS 'WARDS'. THE QUEEN DIDN'T SEE WHY GORDON HAD TO HARVEST NEARLY SEVENTY PERCENT OF THE COMMERCIAL PROFITS GENERATED BY THE PLANETS OF THE SO-CALLED INNER RING. GORDON WAS JUST A GREEDY AND INSOLENT SCOUNDREL WHO WAS GOING TO MAKE HER PAY. BUT IT WASN'T THE MONEY THAT WAS THE REASON, IT WAS HIS TREATMENT OF HER RACE. MYERANIANS WERE SHORT IN STATURE AND A BIT SHY IN THEIR CONTACT WITH OTHER RACES. GORDON HAD DEMONSTRATED HIS USE OF THIS APPROACH TO ISOLATE THEM AND DISCOURAGE THEM FROM SKIPPING OVER HIM WHEN MAKING COMMUNICATIONS WITH CERTAIN RACES. IN SHORT HE WAS TRYING TO IMPOSE AN INFERIORITY COMPLEX ON THEM, CLEARLY AWARE OF THEIR INTELLECTUAL AND MATERIAL SUPERIORITY. THE MYERANIANS HAD TO GRIT THEIR TEETH AND ENDURE THESE ARBITRARY ACTIONS, AS THEY STILL FELT LIKE PAWNS IN THE EXPERIENCED HANDS OF THE CITY LEADER.

NATURALLY THEY HAD A GOOD ENOUGH MEMORY TO TEACH HIM ONCE AND FOR ALL THAT IT WOULD BE WELL FOR HIM TO RESPECT THEM AT LEAST A LITTLE, FOR WITHOUT THEIR FINANCIAL SUPPORT HE WOULD NOT HAVE WON THE ELECTION.

THE PECULIARITY IN THE EDUCATION OF THIS RACE WAS IN THEIR MANNER, UNENCUMBERED BY MATERIAL SCRUPLES, FOR THEY SECRETLY POSSESSED MOST OF THE WEALTH OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA. EVEN A NOT INSIGNIFICANT PORTION OF GORDON'S FORTUNE WAS ALSO TO SOME EXTENT THEIR PROPERTY.

GORDON'S MAIN SIN WAS HIS GUILT, THAT HE HAD WILLINGLY OR UNWILLINGLY DELAYED THEIR DEVELOPMENT, OR AT LEAST SOME OF THEIR PLANS RELATING TO IT.

THE MYRANIANS WERE LOOKING A THOUSAND YEARS INTO THEIR FUTURE. COMPELLED BY CIRCUMSTANCES, THEY HAD HAD TO REDUCE SOME OF THESE PLANS TO A PERIOD SHORTER THAN THIRTY

YEARS, A PRACTICALLY IMPOSSIBLE THING. AFTER MUCH DEBATE, THEIR SCIENTISTS ARRIVED AT THE ONLY POSSIBLE SOLUTION - THE CONSTRUCTION OF SUPERMODERN NUNDRIGO SHIPS, PREVIOUSLY UNKNOWN, TO ALLOW FUTURE SETTLEMENT AT LEAST AS FAR AS THE PLANETS OF THE SO-CALLED OUTER RING. THOSE PLANNED AFTER THE HUNDREDTH QUADRANT BELONGED TO IT. THERE WAS NO MISTAKING IT, GORDON HAD BEEN WRONG ENOUGH TO BE WORRIED ABOUT THEIR RETRIBUTION. BUT HE WASN'T SURE IF THEY WERE THE ONES ATTACKING HIM, AS HE'D SCREWED TOO MANY OTHER RACES OVER THE LONG TERM, SUCH AS THE ELINAZAI, THE ARRHENOI, THE PENOQUAQTORS, AND MANY OTHERS. THESE RACES HADN'T EVEN SET FOOT ON THE SURFACE OF ZEGANDARIA, BUT THE CONTACTS WERE KEPT BY GORDON AND HE WAS HOARDING THE PROFITS HE STORED IN THE BOWELS OF HIS SKYSCRAPER. GORDON FOLLOWED A RATHER SIMPLE INVESTMENT PRINCIPLE. QUANTITATIVE ACCUMULATION OF WEALTH WOULD AT SOME POINT CARRY HIS REAL POWER FAR BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA.

MIERU WAS NO TRIFLE. GORDON HAD BEEN GETTING HIS FOR SO MANY YEARS WITHOUT GIVING TOO MUCH IN RETURN. NOW IT WAS HIS TURN TO PAY WITH INTEREST. AND HE WAS DETERMINED TO DO SO. AND HOW! THE QUEEN OF THE MYERANIANS WAS GOING TO PUNISH HIM IN HER OWN WAY. THE MYERANIANS HAD A SAYING, 'NUNDRIGO IR HUS DO SO LIR EX COUS MO.' THE QUEEN WAS DETERMINED TO ACQUAINT HIM WITH ITS MEANING.

^^^

CYCLO TO SENSED THAT THE PLANET WAS UNDER SIEGE EARLY ENOUGH. HE HAD ALREADY SENT ORDERS TO MOBILIZE AVAILABLE FORCES FOR A COUNTERATTACK. HE COULD USE GORDON'S MOMENTARY WEAKNESS TO TAKE HIM OUT. BUT SOMETHING HAD UNHINGED HIM. THE ORACLE WHO HAD FORETOLD AN ENTIRE PLANET COULD NOT FIND THE STRENGTH WITHIN HIMSELF TO END IT ONCE AND FOR ALL. HE ASSUMED THAT GORDON WAS BEING HUNTED BY OTHERS, AND IF HE KILLED HIM NOW HE WOULD SULLY HIS DIGNITY AS

HIGH PRIEST OF SEBUR NAG HIMSELF. AND THERE WAS NO TELLING IF THE HATRED OF HIS PERSECUTORS WOULD SPILL OVER ONTO HIMSELF.

THE MYERANIANS HAD NO SUSPICION OF HIS ABILITIES, AS THE SEBURNAGI WERE NOTORIOUS FOR KEEPING SECRETS. NONE BUT GORDON WAS AWARE OF HIS ORACLE GIFT.

EVERYTHING HAD TO THWART THIS DESPERATE ASSAULT AIMED AT THE SURVIVAL OF THE MYERANIANS.

CYCLO TO ORDERED GORDON TO BE TAKEN TO SAFETY, ALONG WITH THE GUARDS HE HAD BEEN LEADING SINCE OSONIA. HE NEEDED TO THINK FOR A MOMENT. AFTER A WHILE HE BEGAN TO CONCENTRATE ENERGY THROUGH HIS MIND. EMANDAN'S ENERGY FIELD WAS SOMETHING VERY RARE AND REQUIRED PARTICULAR SKILL TO USE AGAINST CERTAIN INDIVIDUALS. CYCLO TO DECIDED TO ATTACK THE SHIPS CREW DIRECTLY WITH A PSYCHO ATTACK, HE STRAINED AGAIN BUT SEEMED TO BE BLIND. HIS MIND WAS SLIPPING LIKE A SMOOTH PANE OF OBSIDIAN-COLORED ENDOSIAN, AND HE COULD NOT SEE WHAT LAY BEYOND.

THE DORMANT ANGER IN THE ORACLE'S CHEST WAS UNLEASHED. HE REALIZED THAT SOMEWHERE DEEP INSIDE HE HAD BEEN VERY WRONG. HIS MORALE HAD FALLEN, AND SO HAD THE ENERGY AURA HE WAS TRYING TO USE AGAINST THE ENEMY INVADERS. THERE WAS NO ESCAPE. HE WAS MENTALLY DEAD THIS TIME. PERHAPS HE WOULD EVER REGAIN HIS EQUILIBRIUM. PERHAPS HE WOULD REAP GREATER SUCCESSES NEXT TIME. BUT THE INVADERS WERE COMING NOW. HE HAD NOT HEARD OF THE MYERANIANS. HE DIDN'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THEY LOOKED LIKE. IMMEDIATELY, HE ORDERED THE ACTIVATION OF THE LEVEL TWO ENERGY NERIUM SHIELD AS THE ONLY ALTERNATIVE THAT WOULD KEEP THE APPROACHES TO THE CAPITAL CITY OF NARAS TU OPEN.

NARAS TU HAD TO SURVIVE AT ALL COSTS. THE DEATHS OF SO MANY SEBURNAGI COULD HAVE BEEN AVOIDED, BUT CYCLO TO REALIZED CLEARLY HIS GREAT MISTAKE. GORDON WAS NEVER REALLY

NEEDED, AND THANKS TO HIS BENEFICENCE, HE HELD THE POWER. CYCLO TO REALIZED HIS INGRATITUDE WITH A BITTER TASTE.

HIS TALL DRY FIGURE HUNCHED SLIGHTLY IN ANTICIPATION OF THE DREADED BLOW, BUT NONE FOLLOWED. THE MYERANIANS WERE STUBBORNLY SILENT. THIS, HOWEVER, DID NOT DISSUADE CYCLO TO.

THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF NARAS TU WAS THAT IT WAS THE CAPITAL OF THE TRANSITION ZONE TO IVINON RUS, THE MOST RESOURCE-RICH PART OF THE PLANET. BESIDES, CYCLOLOQUE TO DIDN'T WANT THE ENTIRE SEBURNAG CIVILIZATION, BUILT WITH SO MUCH EFFORT AFTER YEARS OF BLOODY WARS, TO COLLAPSE.

THE SEBURNAGI WERE VALIANT WARRIORS, BUT HE DECIDED TO SIMPLY NOT ANSWER THE PROVOCATION. INSTEAD, SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF THE PLANET LURKED THE FLOWER OF RIEN

INSTEAD OF BEING ENEMIES, CYCLO TO WOULD WELCOME THEM AS DEAR GUESTS . AND SINCE HIS INTUITION WHISPERED TO HIM THAT THEY HAD SOME KIND OF LEADER AFTER ALL, HE THOUGHT OF GIVING HIM THE FLOWER.

THIS FLOWER WAS EXTRAORDINARILY BEAUTIFUL. BLOOD-RED AND BEWITCHING TO THE SENSES, IT LOOKED LIKE A ROSE WITHOUT THORNS, BUT IN PRACTICE IT WAS MUCH MORE SPECIAL. IT WAS CYCLO TO'S MOST TREASURED POSSESSION. NO ONE ELSE ON THIS PLANET, NOT EVEN GORDON, HIS CLOSEST ASSOCIATE, SUSPECTED IT. HE GUARDED IT LIKE THE APPLE OF HIS EYE. THE FLOWER COULD PROVE TO BE HIS ONLY SECRET ALLY AGAINST THE MYERAN SCUM THREATENING HIS THRONE.

CYCLO TO HAD DECIDED TO BE A LOYAL PARTNER WITH GORDON - INSOFAR AS A HOST SHOULD SHOW A SEMBLANCE OF COURTESY, HOWEVER INSIDIOUS, TO HIS GUEST WHO APPEARED TO BE A THREAT TO HIM.

CYCLO TO COULD SIMPLY GIVE THE MYERANIANS WHAT THEY WANTED. BUT IN THAT CASE, IN HIS OWN EYES, HE WOULD HAVE MORALLY LOST THE WAR. THERE WAS A GOOD CHANCE THAT GORDON WOULD BE LEAKING VERY IMPORTANT SECRETS ABOUT THEIR COOPERATION. AND THAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE END OF THE GAME FOR THE ORACLE. AND FOR MANY OTHERS WHO WERE PART OF THEIR CLIQUE.

EVEN ON SEBUR NAG THEY SENT THE CRIMINALS, OR RATHER THE TRAITORS, TO THE APHILIM FOREST WHERE THEY WERE IRRADIATED WITH PSYCHIC RADIATION, AND BLINDED, BUT ONLY UNTIL THEY REGAINED THEIR LEVEL OF MORALITY. THEN THEY GRADUALLY BECAME LUCID. THE ORACLE MADE NO SECRET OF HIS WORRY THAT IT MIGHT BE A LONG TIME BEFORE HE EVER REGAINED HIS OWN SIGHT. IT COULD PROVE TO BE QUITE DIFFICULT TO FIND A WAY BACK TO RESTORE HIS OWN MORALE.

CYCLO TO REMEMBERED A STORY FROM LONG AGO ABOUT A YOUNG SEBURNAG WHO HAD IT ALL AND WAS IN A HIGH GOVERNMENT POSITION IN THE NARAS TU COLONY CITY OF SITOK IRO, A BIT OF A LARGE SETTLEMENT FOR SPACE HUNTING OF BIRDFISH. THAT WAS THE REAL LIVELIHOOD IN THOSE PARTS. AND THE YOUNG MAN, LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, HAD GIVEN HIS ALL TO KEEP UP HIS DAILY CATCH. BUT IN TIME HE BECAME CARELESS, CARELESS AND LAZY. HE FELL VERY LOW. AND HIS FELLOW CITIZENS TRAVELED MUCH OF THE PLANET TO CORRECT HIS UNPLEASANT TEMPER AND RESTORE HIS MORALE. AS HE SLOWLY BEGAN TO GO BLIND, HE BEGAN TO REALIZE THAT HIS SALVATION DEPENDED ON HIM AND NO ONE ELSE. BUT IT WAS NOT ENOUGH TO MERELY TAKE THE APPROPRIATE ACTION, BUT TO REALLY TRY TO BECOME A BETTER SEBURNAG. IN THE END, THE STORY STILL ENDED WITH A HAPPY ENDING (HE WAS A LEGEND AFTER ALL!). THE SEBURNAG SAW WHAT WAS OF VALUE IN HIS LIFE, WHICH WAS TO BE PART OF A SOCIUM, OR AT LEAST TO TRY, BY HELPING OTHERS.

THE MYSTERY OF THESE LITTLE HOLES IN THE PSYCHE WAS GREAT. THEY WERE THE PROFOUND KEY TO SALVATION - SUCH AS IT WAS

MEANT TO BE. HOWEVER, CYCLO TO WANTED TO SOAK THE NEWLY ARRIVED MONARCH AND THUS DELIVER HIMSELF. THE FLOWER COULD DESTROY HIS BEHAVIORAL AND MANAGERIAL QUALITIES IN THEIR INFANCY. IT WAS STILL SOME CHANCE, BUT NOT FOR LONG. MIERU COULDN'T FALL FOR THE TRAP THAT EASILY, BUT CYCLO TO KNEW THAT WHEN THE NUNDRIGO SHIPS RAN OUT OF FUEL, SHE HAD A DECISION TO MAKE. HE WANTED TO PUT HER IN A STALEMATE AND DESTROY HER. HE COULD EVEN SOMEHOW ADAPT THE MYERANIANS TO LIFE ON SEBUR NAG. SO MANY SLAVES! THEY COULD HAVE BEEN A HUGE HELP!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: IN THE FOREST

THE MESSAGE BROUGHT TO THE PALACE OF CYCLO TO SPOKE OF AN UNEQUIVOCAL MEETING BETWEEN THE ORACLE AND THE PRINCESS. CYCLOUS TO RETURNED THE MESSENGER WITH THE REVERSE DEMAND THAT THE MEETING BE ON HIS TERRITORY, AND FURTHERMORE GAVE THE EXPRESS WISH THAT IT SHOULD BE HELD IN THE FAMOUS AFILLIA WOODS, WHICH WERE AVOIDED BY THE VAST MAJORITY OF THE POPULATION. THESE FORESTS WERE ENTIRELY EATEN BY APHILIUM APHIDS, WHICH WERE FOUND ON A VERY DISTANT PLANET THAT HAD LONG SINCE CEASED TO EXIST, AND WAS CALLED EARTH. NATURALLY, THE APHIDS WERE KEPT IN SPECIAL CONDITIONS TO BE PRESERVED AND TRANSPORTED TO SEBUR NAG. CYCLO TO WANTED TO HAVE A FULLY EXPOSED FOREST, BECAUSE HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE BEAUTIFUL AGAINST THE HUGE PURPLE BLOSSOMS THAT COVERED THE ENTIRE SURFACE OF HIS DOMAIN. HOWEVER, THE REAL REASON WAS THAT THERE WERE EXTREMELY DENSE FORESTS NEAR THE BARE WOODS, WHICH WERE A CONVENIENT PLACE TO HIDE HIS HUGE ARMIES. SOME OF THE SEBURNAGI HAD EVEN BURROWED UNDERGROUND AND ONLY CAST THEIR EYES OUTWARDS, READY TO ACT ON A SET SIGNAL AND ATTACK THE ENEMIES. HE WAS ALWAYS INVITING REPRESENTATIVES OF ALIEN RACES TO THIS PLACE TO SETTLE SCORES WITH THEM. HE



WAS QUITE IMMORAL. AND THAT WAS WHY HE DOUBTED HIS ORACLE SKILLS A LITTLE, BUT HE STILL KEPT GUESSING.

THE PRINCESS WASN'T LATE AND SHOWED UP. SHE WAS ACCOMPANIED BY HER LOYAL MYERANIAN WARRIORS. SO MANY LITTLE MEN IN ONE PLACE WAS VERY HARD FOR ANYONE TO GATHER. THEY MOVED IN A SYNCHRONICITY THAT WAS EVEN HARD TO DESCRIBE. EVERY STEP THEY TOOK EVEN CREATED A SORT OF RESONANCE ON THE SURFACE OF THE GROUND.

THE ORACLE GAINED A SERIOUS EXPRESSION. THE PRINCESS WANTED GORDON ELMBAUM AND MAYBE SOMETHING ELSE. BUT CYCLO TO WAS SURE HE HAD TO PLAY IT SAFE, AND HE SIMPLY DIDN'T WANT TO TRUST HIS DIVINATION GIFT ALONE.

SEVERAL OF THE LITTLE NUNDRIGO WERE ALLOWED TO LAND NEAR THE FOREST. MIERU HOPED THE KILLER COCOONS IN QUESTION HAD FALLEN IN THE VICINITY, HAVING BEEN DEFTLY DROPPED BY THEIR SHIPS BACK WHEN THEY WERE EXPLORING THE PLANET. THEY'D TIPPED THE SCALES IN HER FAVOR. THEY WERE SO SMALL THAT NO ANTI-RADAR SYSTEMS COULD DETECT THEM. AND THEIR POWER WAS AMAZING. THE DEVICES COULD MELT ANYTHING WITHIN TWO HUNDRED METERS IN DIAMETER. AH, IF ONLY THERE WERE A FEW OF THEM AROUND!

EVERY STEP HAD TO BE WATCHED CLOSELY. IT WAS KNOWN THAT IT WOULD ALL MAKE AN IMPACT, BUT NOT LEAST THE MYERANIANS THEMSELVES WERE FASCINATED BY THE BEAUTIFUL PLANET THEY WANTED TO SETTLE ON. THOUGH A PARASITIC RACE, THEY COULD NOT ADMIT THAT THEY HAD NEVER INHABITED SUCH A PLACE. THE PURPLE BLOSSOMS WHISPERED A LULLABY TO THEM. SEBUR NAG WAS WELCOMING HIS GUESTS.

MYERANIAN WARRIORS COULD BE VERY DANGEROUS, ESPECIALLY WHEN ATTACKING IN GROUPS. THEY WERE SIMPLY UNSTOPPABLE. THE LITTLE VICIOUS MEN WERE CAPABLE OF DEALING WITH OPPONENTS EVEN OF GIANT SIZE. NO ONE AND NOTHING WAS ABLE

TO STOP THEM. THEY WERE LIKE A HUGE COLONY OF RABID LOCUSTS. SOMEWHERE INSIDE, THE ORACLE REALIZED THIS.

THE COMMANDERS OF THE SEBURNAGI ALSO SENSED THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG. WHY WERE ONLY A FEW SHIPS COMING TO AUDIENCE?

THE DESIGN OF EACH NUNDRIGO SHIP WAS VERY INTERESTING. THEY HAD BORROWED SOME ELEMENTS FROM THE ZIRUARX'S THERMOFLON ARMOR AND WRAPPED THE SKELETON OF THE SHIPS WITH THEM. EACH OF THEM COULD WITHSTAND A MICRONUCLEAR ATTACK. ONE OF THE SHIPS WAS OVER A HUNDRED AND TWENTY METERS LONG.

CYCLO TO WAS IMPRESSED BY THE ADVANCED TECHNOLOGY THEY WERE USING. APPARENTLY THEY WERE FOLLOWING THEIR OWN PATH OF DEVELOPMENT AND DIDN'T WANT TO COOPERATE WITH THE OTHER RACES VERY-MUCH.

MIERU SPOKE FIRST AND TRIED TO BE MORE WELCOMING. THE ORACLE DIDN'T MIND THAT. HE WAS FIRST AND FOREMOST A GENTLEMAN.

SOMEWHERE IN THE DISTANCE, THE WIND WAS BLOWING AND REMINDING EVERYONE OF THE BEGINNING OF SOMETHING NEW, BEAUTIFUL AND UNKNOWN. A WHIFF OF SOMETHING SO DEEPLY INGRAINED WITHIN EACH OF US, SOMETHING LONG FORGOTTEN BUT UTTERLY IMPORTANT.

- 'WE HAVE NO INTENTION OF ATTACKING YOUR PLANET,' MIERU ADDRESSED HIS INTERLOCUTOR MEEKLY. 'WE ONLY WANT TO STAY HERE WITH OUR SHIPS AND REST.'

- 'I DON'T MIND,' SAID CYCLO TO, EXTREMELY MILDLY. 'BUT IS THAT THE ONLY THING YOU'RE LOOKING FOR, OR IS THERE SOMETHING ELSE?'

- 'WE'RE LOOKING FOR A MAN,' SHE SHOWED HIM A HOLOGRAM IMAGE OF THE GOVERNOR.

- 'I KNOW HOW TO HELP YOU, BUT I ALSO WANT SOMETHING IN RETURN,' HE SAID FLATTERINGLY. 'WE SEBURNAGI ARE KNOWN FOR OUR HOSPITALITY. LET ME OFFER YOU A FLOWER, MADAM.,' AND HE VERY CAREFULLY TOOK THE FLOWER RIEN OUT OF THE HEM OF HIS ROBE.

MIERU WAS DEEPLY IMPRESSED BY THE BEAUTIFUL FLOWER. THERE WAS NO DOUBT. SOMEWHERE IN THERE, THE FLOWER HAD AN IRRESISTIBLE ATTRACTION FOR HER.

- 'WHOEVER TAKES THIS FLOWER GAINS IMMENSE POWER,' HE CONTINUED HIS HYPOCRITICAL TIRADE SLOWLY.

MIERU WAS ABOUT TO TAKE THE FLOWER, BUT AT THE LAST MOMENT PULLED HIS HAND AWAY. THERE WAS SOMETHING ROTTEN HERE. HE DECIDED TO ACTIVATE THE COCOONS.

THE DIPLOMATIC DETONATOR DID ITS JOB. SEBURNAG LIMBS FLAILED IN THE AIR. AND THE MYERANIANS JUMPED UP AND NEARLY CHEWED THE REMAINING SURVIVORS TO DEATH.

THE ORACLE WAS SIMPLY SPEECHLESS. APPARENTLY HIS CLAIRVOYANT ABILITIES WERE NOT ENOUGH TO WIN THE BATTLE.

MIERU ORDERED HIM TO BE CHAINED AND THROWN INTO AN ISOLATED CHAMBER WHERE HE WOULD SIMPLY STARVE TO DEATH.

THE MYERANIANS SEEMED LIKE THEY WERE GOING TO TAKE OVER THE PLANET. AGAIN, SNEAKY WITH THEIR SURVIVALIST APPROACH.

WITHOUT TOUCHING THE FLOWER, USING HER SUPERNATURAL ABILITIES, SHE HANDED IT TO THE GOVERNOR, WHO RESISTED TAKING IT. AS SOON AS THE FLOWER TOUCHED HIS CHEEK, AN INSTANT REACTION FOLLOWED. HIS EYES BUGGED OUT UNTIL HE STOPPED BREATHING. WHEN HE PULLED HIMSELF TOGETHER, HE SAW THE FEW SURVIVING SEBURNAGI BACK AWAY FROM HIM, POINTING THEIR FINGERS IN DISBELIEF.

HE SCOWLED.

- WITH YOUR FLOWERS ON YOUR HEAD, ORACLE! NOW TAKE ME TO GORDON! AND THAT IS AN ORDER!

WHEN MIERU CAME FACE TO FACE WITH THE GOVERNOR, SHE SPAT AT HIM. MORE ACCURATELY, SHE WANTED TO, BUT INSTEAD SHE SMEARED THE VISOR OF HER OWN SUIT. SHE HATED HIM SO MUCH FOR HIS ARROGANT ATTITUDE.

GORDON BOWED HIS HEAD, NOT IN SHAME, BUT BECAUSE HE CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD THAT HE HAD BEEN OUTSMARTED THIS TIME. AND AT HIS OWN GAME AT THAT.

CYCLO TO HAD ROLLED HIS EYES AND LOST THE PSYCHOLOGICAL POWER HE WIELDED OVER HIS SUBJECTS. HE WAS NOW A BEATEN CARD. THE LITTLE QUEEN DIDN'T CARE ABOUT HIM SO MUCH ANYMORE. WHAT MATTERED WAS GORDON AND HIS KNOWLEDGE OF CERTAIN MATTERS DIRECTLY CONCERNING HER AND THE RULE OF HER SUBJECTS.

- 'TELL ME GORDON, HOW EXACTLY DID HE STAY IN POWER FOR FIVE WHOLE TERMS?,' ASKED MIERU BLUNTLY. 'THAT INTERESTS ME GREATLY!'

- 'NO SECRET!,' STAMMERED GORDON.

WITHOUT UTTERING A SOUND, MIERU POURED BERAN POLLEN INTO HIS SUIT'S OPENING, FORCING HIS VICTIM TO TELL THE TRUTH. GORDON BEGAN TO FLUSH LIKE A CANCER AND FELT THE FLESH ABOVE HIS SKULL SWELL AS IF HE HAD CEREBRAL EDEMA.

- 'I'M GIVING YOU ONE LAST CHANCE,' SHE SAID STERNLY, 'OR YOU'RE GIVING ME THE INFORMATION I NEED. OR THE POLLEN WILL FINISH YOU.'

- 'IT WAS ALL DONE WITH THE HELP OF MY SPECIAL ABILITIES GIVEN TO ME BY THE ARCHANEANS,' HE GROWLED SOFTLY.

- 'WHAT RACE IS THAT?,' THE LITTLE PRINCESS INQUIRED. 'I HAVE NEVER SEEN THEIR REPRESENTATIVES. THEY MUST BE VERY ADVANCED INTELLECTUALLY AND TECHNICALLY!'

- 'NOT EXACTLY,' MUTTERED GORDON. 'I PUT THEM UNDER MY CONTROL AND THEY GAVE ME SUCH A LONG LIFE.'

- 'AND SO? THAT'S YOUR SECRET!,' THE LITTLE PRINCESS INDIGNANTLY CRIED. 'YOU ARE NOT A MORAL MAN AT ALL, GORDON. BUT WHAT WONDER, YOU ARE QUITE FIT FOR THE POSITION YOU HOLD.'

- 'NOW LET ME TELL YOU MY LITTLE SECRET, GOVERNOR! THE FICTIONAL DEITY THORNUS WAS A GOOD EXCUSE TO MANAGE TO EXIST FOR SO MANY YEARS. AND THE CATHEDRAL WAS OUR GRAVEYARD. MY RACE IS NOT THE MOST RELIGIOUS, BUT IT WAS THE ONLY STABLE THING WE COULD THINK OF. THAT WAY WE COULD HIDE FOR LONG ENOUGH AND SURVIVE. OUR MODEL TURNED OUT TO BE MORE PROFITABLE THAN YOURS,' THE LITTLE PRINCESS HAD CHANGED THE EXPRESSION ON HER FACE, SHOWING SATISFACTION THAT SHE HAD FINALLY PREVAILED OVER HER OPPONENT. 'WHERE YOUR MONEY WASN'T REACHING THE PEOPLE, THE GOD THORNUS WAS. WE SECRETLY FUNDED SOME OF THE MERCENARIES WHO FOUGHT AGAINST YOU. EVENTUALLY THE WHOLE PLANET GOT SICK OF YOU AND CHASED YOU OFF HARD.,' MIERU CONTINUED TO GLOAT, BUT SHE HAD EVERY RIGHT TO DO SO.

CYCLO TO REALIZED FOR THE FIRST TIME HOW USED BY THE GOVERNOR HE ACTUALLY WAS. SO MUCH TIME AT THAT FOR ONE NOTHING. CYCLO TO MENTALLY AGREED THAT GORDON DESERVED A TERRIBLE FATE AS WELL.

SEBUR NAG WAS ENCHANTING WITH THE MARANATHA THAT DESCENDED OVER THE SOUTHEASTERN SLOPES OF THE ZIN OR TUG MOUNTAIN RANGE. WONDERFUL MAJESTIC HILLS RISING NOT TOO FAR FROM THE CASTLE OF CYCLO TO. GORDON COULD EASILY HAVE BEEN LEFT WEARING ONLY A SPACESUIT, WITHOUT A SPARE COMPRESSED AIR BOTTLE AND SACRIFICED AS A SEBURNAG TIRFAN.

ALTHOUGH NO SUCH ANIMALS WERE FOUND ON THE PLANET SEBUR NAG, THEIR NATURAL HABITAT BEING ANOTHER PLANET BEARING THE SONOROUS NAME OF MAR TUN DOK, THEY WERE CARRIED IN HUGE TIBENIAN CAPSULES FOR TRANSPORTING ANIMALS IN SPACE CONDITIONS. CYCLO TO HAD AN ENTIRE HERD INHABITING AN ISOLATED AREA, AS THE ENTIRE AREA OF THE PLANET THAT HOUSED HIS ADMINISTRATIVE DOMAIN WAS WARMED BY AN ARTIFICIAL SUN THAT FULLY SUPPLIED HIS NEEDS. GORDON ALWAYS STAYED AT THIS RESIDENCE OF HIS BECAUSE OF SAID SUN.

AT FIRST, MIERU SIMPLY SAID THEY COULD LET GORDON GO TO THE TYRPHANS, WHO WOULD STOMP HIM TO DEATH, BUT CYCLO TO WAS MERCIFUL. HE DECIDED TO LET PROVIDENCE PUNISH THE CRUEL POLITICIAN.

THE METROPOLITAN CITY OF NARAS TU WAS EXACTLY SIX HUNDRED AND SEVENTY-FIVE SEBURNAG MILES FROM THE SOVEREIGN'S CHAMBERS. HE LOVED SPENDING TIME HERE, PLOTTING DEVIOUS PLANS WITH GORDON ELMBAUM. NOW, HOWEVER, UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF THE LITTLE QUEEN, THE GOVERNOR WOULD BE SENT BACK INTO OPEN SPACE. AND KEEPING HIM COMPANY WOULD BE HIS CLONE-PROTÉGÉ, CHRIS ZONRETHIS. IT WAS MEANT TO BE!

THEY PREPARED GORDON'S SHIP AND REPROGRAMMED IT TO MAINTAIN AUTOPILOT UNTIL ENTERING THE SO-CALLED PREPARATORY EXANAL PHASE, BEFORE MAKING THE COLLAPSAR JUMP. FOR THE FIRST TIME, GORDON WAS ABOUT TO OBSERVE SOMETHING OVER WHICH HE HAD NO CONTROL - BEING SENT IN A COMPLETELY UNKNOWN DIRECTION.

CYCLO TO KNEW THAT ON OSONIA, WHICH WAS INCOMMENSURABLY DISTANT FROM SEBUR NAG, SOME PEOPLE WERE QUESTIONING OUR HERO VERY HARD. AND THEY WERE BURNING WITH DESIRE TO STOP HIM AND HOLD HIM TO ACCOUNT. THE ORACLE DECIDED THAT THIS WAS THE RIGHT THING TO DO.

## CHAPTER THIRTY: THE RECKONING

KENJI DECIDED TO GO BACK TO OSONIA AGAIN, AS THE JOURNEY FURTHER WAS TOO RISKY. THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE ENOUGH FUEL, AND THE NEXT QUADRANTS WERE EXTREMELY POORLY EXPLORED AND PERHAPS COMPLETELY DESERTED.

PENROSE ACCEPTED HIS ARGUMENT WITH SLIGHT RESERVATIONS, BUT AGREED NONETHELESS.

THE POLITICAL PRISONERS RELEASED FROM THE CAGE WERE HAPPY TO SEE PINDOR, WHO WAS STILL IN AN AWAKE COMA. WHEN THEY INQUIRED ABOUT HIS CONDITION, THEY WERE VERY SADDENED. TO SURVIVE THE JUMPS, HIS BODY WAS IN A SPECIAL ISOLATED AIRTIGHT CHAMBER TO WHICH ONLY CAPTAIN PENROSE HAD ACCESS.

SHORTLY BEFORE TAKEOFF, THEY SAW A SMALL WHITE DOT MOVING ACROSS THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET. IT WAS JONATHAN HEARNS. WITHOUT GIVING IT MUCH THOUGHT, THEY ACTIVATED A SPECIAL GRAVITY FIELD THAT SUCKED IT INSIDE THE HULL OF THE SHIP.

ACUSTRO TURNED WHITE WITH RAGE AS HE SAW THE FUGITIVE HEARNS ACROSS FROM HIM. HE KNEW THAT JONATHAN WAS MOST AWARE OF MANY DETAILS SURROUNDING THE COLONY AND WOULD ONLY MAKE HIS ALREADY ROSY SITUATION WORSE. ACUSTRO WAS PROBABLY LOOKING AT A DEATH SENTENCE OR BEING SHOT ALIVE IN A BURIAL CAPSULE INTO OUTER SPACE. HE WASN'T GOING TO GET AWAY WITH THE ENORMOUS ATROCITIES HE'D COMMITTED.

JONATHAN HELD HIMSELF IMPASSIVELY. BUT THERE WAS TRIUMPH IN HIS GAZE. TRIUMPH AT LOOKING HIS FORMER OPPRESSOR STRAIGHT IN THE EYE, AND NOT EVEN BLINKING. HE HAD TO BE TAUGHT THAT HE WASN'T OMNIPOTENT.

THE RETURN OF OSONIA THIS TIME WOULD ALSO AROUSE THE SUSPICIONS OF THE LOCALS. SO THEY DECIDED TO REMAIN IN A

STATE OF FREE HOVER IN CLOSE ORBIT TO THE PLANET. THEY COULD THINK OF NO BETTER IDEA THAN THAT.

PENROSE ACTIVELY SET ABOUT INTERROGATING ACUSTRO. HE ANSWERED RATHER STIFFLY AND GLOSSED OVER SOME MINOR DETAILS, HOPING TO EASE HIS SITUATION. THEN PENROSE QUESTIONED THE PRISONERS ONE BY ONE. KENJI HAD GIVEN HIM SOME PRELIMINARY INFORMATION AND NOW HE WAS CHECKING EVERYTHING. NO ONE HAD LIED. WHICH WAS GOOD.

LIROITH WAS LOOKED UPON WITH PARTICULAR RESPECT AS HE WAS ONE OF THE MAIN INSTIGATORS OF THE MUTINY. THE PRISONERS WOULD GIVE HIM THE CREDIT HE DESERVED AS SOON AS THEY LANDED IN SOMEPLACE MORE PEACEFUL.

THE FLIGHT WAS NOT MUCH MORE INTERESTING THIS TIME.

STANDING IN A CLOSE ORBIT TO OSONIA, THEY CAUGHT SOME CHANGES, WHICH WAS OF COURSE NORMAL FROM THE ACCUMULATED SUBJECTIVE TIME. THERE WAS NOTHING WRONG WITH THAT. THE PLANET WAS ALSO DIFFERENT FROM WHEN SPEARS AND THE OTHERS HAD LANDED ON IT.

BUT THEN SOMETHING VERY STRANGE HAPPENED - THEY SPOTTED A MILITARY SHUTTLE ALSO STANDING IN CLOSE ORBIT AROUND THE PLANET. THEY DECIDED TO LOOK THEM OVER FROM A SAFE DISTANCE. SPEARS HAD ALSO DECIDED TO MAKE SUBJECTIVE JUMPS IN HOPES OF GETTING A LOCK ON THE GOVERNOR. SO FAR, IT WASN'T WORKING OUT FOR HIM. GORDON WAS STILL GOING TO SHOW UP SOMETIME.

SPEARS ALSO SPOTTED 'EMSIRU'. HE IMMEDIATELY GUESSED THAT A SIMILAR SHUTTLE WAS MOST LIKELY COMING FROM ZEGANDARIA. BUT JUST IN CASE, HE ORDERED BATTLE READINESS.

SOON SIGNALS WERE EXCHANGED BETWEEN THE SHIPS AND THEY GUESSED THEY WERE FRIENDLY.



MIRACULOUSLY, GORDON'S SHIP MATERIALIZED BETWEEN THEM. THIS HE COULD NOT HAVE FORESEEN. INSTANTLY THEY FIRED ON THE ENGINES. AND THE INTERRON FUEL IGNITED. THE SHIP SLOWLY BEGAN TO 'LOSE' ALTITUDE AND PLUMMET INTO DEEP SPACE. ON BOARD IT WAS MOST LIKELY THE GOVERNOR. WITH HIS ENGINES DAMAGED, HE HAD NOWHERE TO ESCAPE EVEN IF HE CATAPULTED A LIFE CAPSULE. SPEARS CHASED HIM DOWN WITH ONE OF THE SHUTTLES. KENJI DIDN'T BOTHER HIM. IT WAS POINTLESS TO INCLUDE HIM. A SHORT TIME LATER, THE GOVERNOR WAS CAPTURED. AS WAS HIS PROTÉGÉ, CHRIS ZONRETHIS.

THE TWO OF THEM WERE TAKEN INTO A SPECIAL ROOM COVERED IN HYON FIBER WHERE THE INTERROGATIONS BEGAN. THE GOVERNOR WAS BEATEN AND TORTURED WITH SPECIAL DEVICES, BUT DESPITE THE PAIN HE CONFESSED NOTHING. THEIR SURPRISE WHEN THEY REALIZED THAT CHRIS WAS AN ANDROID AND NOT A HUMAN WAS IMMENSE. THEY REMOVED THE DEITY CHIP FROM HIS HEAD ALONG WITH THE HYON CHIP.

THE GREATEST COMPUTER SPECIALIST WAS JONATHAN HEARNS, AND HE QUICKLY SET ABOUT DECODING THE ENCRYPTED INFORMATION. IT WAS INTERESTING TO SAY HERE THAT THE DATA CHIPS WERE AN OLDER TECHNOLOGY, BUT GORDON HAD PRESCIENTLY TRANSFERRED ALL THE VALUABLE INFORMATION TO THE ION CHIP.

- 'WE NEED SPECIAL EQUIPMENT TO BREAK THE HYON CHIP, WHICH I'M NOT SURE WILL BE FOUND ON OSONIA,' CALLED HERN. 'THERE MAY BE ANOTHER WAY, BUT IT WILL TAKE LONGER.'

- 'HOW MUCH?,' HE WAS ASKED IN CHORUS.

- 'MAYBE ROUGHLY FOUR HUNDRED ZEGANDARIAN YEARS,' HE REPLIED.

- 'THAT'S TOO MANY,' WAS SPEARS' REPLY. 'BUT IT'S NOT FAIR TO JUDGE IT BEFORE WE'VE GATHERED THE FULL EVIDENCE.'

- YOU KNOW, WE COULD LEAVE THE DECRYPTION MACHINE AND DO A FEW JUMPS WITH SUBJECTIVE TIME. IN THAT TIME, THE PASSWORD CRACKING WILL BE DONE.

SPEECH-STEADY.

THEY INSTALLED THE MACHINE IN TUBUR NOG'S CAVE, WHICH IS WHERE THEY FOUND HIS RICHES. WHEN THEY RETURNED AFTER FOUR HUNDRED YEARS, THEY FOUND ALL THE INFORMATION DECRYPTED:

'YOU WHO LISTEN TO THIS INFORMATION SHOULD KNOW THAT NO ONE IS INSURED OF BEING JUDGED BY THE PEOPLE'S WRATH. MY SON VIAR WAS ASSIGNED AS A SUPERINTENDENT AT LABOR COLONY 206, I NEVER SAW HIM. MY GRANDSON ANDREW DISLAN DOESN'T KNOW ME EITHER. I, GORDON ELMBAUM, TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MY ACTIONS, BUT THE CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THOSE ACTIONS SHOULD BE CLARIFIED. AS WE KNOW, THIS WAR WAS STARTED FOR SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT MOTIVES THAN OFFICIALLY STATED. IF YOU LOOK WHERE YOU NEED TO, YOU WILL SEE THAT I AM NOT LYING TO YOU. BUT WHAT BECAME THE MAIN REASON FOR THE CONFLICT WAS PRECISELY THE OPPORTUNITY TO REAP MAXIMUM DIVIDENDS WITH MINIMUM EFFORT. WHAT DO I MEAN? I WAS NOT ALONE IN MY DEEDS, I WAS ASSISTED BY KEITH ENDWALK, THE SON OF AN OLD FRIEND OF MINE. HE WAS THE REASON DIOMEDE BASE FELL. BUT NO ONE SUSPECTED HIM BECAUSE HE CLEVERLY COMBINED HIS PART OF THE PLAN WITH THE GUARRON ATTACK. JACOB WANTED REVENGE ON HIS OWN PEOPLE FOR ALL THE WRONGS THEY HAD DONE HIM. THERE YOU SEE, ALTHOUGH I AM THE MASTERMIND, I AM NOT THE ONLY CULPRIT. BESIDES, CHRIS ZONRETHIS WAS ACTING UNDER MY PRESSURE THE WHOLE TIME, NOT REALIZING HE WAS AN ANDROID. THE RICHES I HID ON OSONIA ARE ONLY A FRACTION OF ALL MY WEALTH THAT I NEVER MANAGED TO TRANSPORT. IT'S IN AN UNDERGROUND BUNKER, RIGHT WHERE SERGEANT ZORIN'S MEN WERE KILLED IN THE ATTEMPTED ASSAULT AND THE GUARRONS WERE KILLED.'

THOSE PRESENT LOOKED AROUND. THEY STARED IN AMAZEMENT AT DISLAN, WHO HAD BOWED HIS HEAD, FLUSHED WITH SHAME. HE COULD NOT BEAR SUCH HUMILIATION. ALL HIS LIFE HE HAD LIVED WITH THIS BURDEN. NO ONE SET OUT TO ATTACK HIM. ON THE CONTRARY. BUT HE SLIPPED AWAY UNNOTICED AND BURST HIS SKULL INTO AN ADJACENT GALLERY. THEY TRIED TO STOP HIM, BUT IT WAS TOO LATE. GABRIEL BURST INTO TEARS WHEN HE SAW HIS LOVER'S BLOODIED FACE. HE SEEMED TO BE MORE AT EASE NOW THAN IN LIFE. EVEN SPEARS WAS TOUCHED.

ELMBAUM WAS TAKEN FROM HIS CELL ABOARD THE SHIP. HIS EYES WERE HOODED, AND HIS EXPRESSION WAS MORE THAN SERIOUS.

SPEARS MET HIM. THEIR EYES MET. ELMBAUM SAID NOTHING. THEN SUDDENLY HE ASKED:

- 'WAS IT HE?', HIS VOICE WAS SIMPLY UNRECOGNIZABLE.

- 'YES, IT'S YOUR DEAD GRANDSON,' CONFIRMED THE ADMIRAL, WHO COULD NOT SYMPATHISE WITH SUCH A VILE CREATURE AS GORDON, BUT AT THE SAME TIME WAS TRYING TO PUT HIMSELF IN HIS PLACE.

HE PULLED BACK TO LEAVE HIM FOR A MOMENT WITH THE DEAD MAN. GORDON CAREFULLY FELT THE BODY. HE DID INDEED RECOGNIZE HIS OWN BLOOD. IN THE CURVE OF HIS LIPS AND ON HIS CHEEBONES, BUT MOSTLY IN HIS EYES. THOSE WERE VIAR'S EYES.

- 'I HAVE LOST MY SON AND MY GRANDSON,' GORDON MOANED, CRUSHED BY THE WEIGHT OF HIS TERRIBLE FATE.

- 'GOVERNOR,' SPEARS TOLD HIM LATER, GIVING HIM SOME TIME TO COMPOSE HIMSELF, 'YOUR WEALTH HAS BEEN CONFISCATED FOR THE BENEFIT OF THE SURVIVORS OF THE UNFORTUNATE WAR. THEIR FAMILIES WILL BE FULLY COMPENSATED. THEY TOO HAVE LOST THEIR CHILDREN.'

GORDON WAS SILENT. HE HAD NOTHING TO SAY. HE LOOKED AT CHRIS'S OPEN HEAD, THE ANDROID HE HAD CREATED IN HIS OWN IMAGE, AND SIGHED HEAVILY.

- 'YOU HAVE DEFEATED ME, GENERAL, AND YOU, REAR ADMIRAL,' HE SPOKE RATHER HEAVILY.

- 'I HAVE A QUESTION, THOUGH?,' INTERJECTED KENJI. 'WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CREW OF THE ENZORIA?'

- 'THE CREW IS SAFE, BUT ONLY IF YOU LET ME GO,' GORDON REPLIED CHEEKILY.

KENJI BARELY REFRAINED FROM SMASHING HIS FACE.

- 'YOU MEAN YOU KIDNAPPED THEM AS INSURANCE?,' THE REAR ADMIRAL ASKED OUTSIDE HIMSELF.

EVEN THROUGH THE TEARS, WHICH WERE GENUINE AS FAR AS HIS DEAD SON AND GRANDSON WERE CONCERNED, GORDON WAS DANGEROUS.

- 'I'LL TELL YOU WHERE THEY ARE, BUT ONLY ON ONE CONDITION,' HE WHISPERED CONFIDENTIALLY.

- 'I'M NOT SURE YOU'RE IN A POSITION TO MAKE ANY CONDITIONS,' SPEARS PRONOUNCED GRAVELY.

- 'I WANT MY ASHES SCATTERED OVER MY NATIVE ZEGANDARIA,' THE GOVERNOR PRONOUNCED WITH ANGUISH.

THEY ALL GASPED. THEY DID NOT BELIEVE IT TO BE A TRICK. THE REQUEST WAS TOO PERSONAL.

- 'WELL, WELL, WHERE ARE THEY?,' ASKED KENJI AGAIN.

- 'WELL, HERE ON OSONIA,' HE ANSWERED THEM SOMEWHAT BREATHLESSLY.

- 'SHOW ME!,' THE MILITARY MAN ORDERED.

GORDON LED THEM TO A CEMETERY WHERE THERE WERE MANY GRAVES, REPRESENTING THE MOST ORDINARY BURIAL CAPSULES IN WHICH THE BODIES OF THE DEAD WERE LAID.

KENJI RECOGNISED HILDA. HE RECOGNIZED OTHER MEMBERS OF THE CREW.

- 'BUT HOW DID YOU KIDNAP THEM?,' WONDERED KENJI.

- 'THROUGH THE TIME GATE,' GORDON REPLIED SIMPLY.

AT FIRST THEY THOUGHT HE WAS JOKING, BUT HE WASN'T. GORDON WAS MORE THAN SERIOUS.

- I JUST HAD A MAN ON BOARD TO DIRECT YOUR SHIP TO SUCH AN ANOMALOUS AREA THAT THERE IS NO ESCAPE.

- 'A BLACK HOLE,' KENJI CORRECTED HIM.

- 'AN ANOMALOUS ZONE,' ELBAUM INSISTED. 'WHERE EVERYONE JUST DISAPPEARS FOREVER.'

- 'AND WHY IS THE SHIP STUCK?,' INSISTED KENJI AGAIN.

- APPARENTLY THE PROPERTIES OF THIS ANOMALY ARE LIKE THAT. BUT IT IS DIFFERENT FROM THE SO-CALLED 'DREAM GATE'. THOUGH THE PRINCIPLE IS SIMILAR.

KENJI WRYLY-LEFT UNDERSTOOD SOMETHING OF THESE CHAOTIC EXPLANATIONS.

- 'ARE THESE BODIES REAL?,' HE ASKED THE GOVERNOR.

- 'THEY'RE JUST CASTS,' PRONOUNCED ELBAUM, MOST UNFEELINGLY.

KENJI BARELY REFRAINED FROM HITTING HIM. HE WAS GOING TO SMASH HIS FACE IN.

- 'THERE'S ONLY ONE THING I DON'T UNDERSTAND,' HE GROUND OUT THROUGH HIS TEETH. 'HOW DID I SURVIVE MYSELF?'

ELBAUM SMILED ENIGMATICALLY AND KENJI DIDN'T INTERRUPT HIM.

- 'THERE ARE TOO MANY PARADOXES IN THIS UNIVERSE, AND THE GATE OF TIME IS ONE OF THEM. YOU JUST HAD THE LUCK OR INSTINCT TO SENSE THAT SOMETHING WAS WRONG. AS A MILITARY COMMANDER, IT IS WELL KNOWN TO YOU THAT THE BOUNDARIES BETWEEN DIMENSIONS CAN INTERTWINE AS THEY EXIST DIFFERENTLY IN SPACETIME, KEEPING IT STABLE. HOWEVER, YOU SLIPPED AWAY, JUST AT THE MOMENT THE TIME GATE WAS OPENED, ALBEIT UNINTENTIONALLY BY ONE OF THE CREW MEMBERS.

- 'AUSLANDER. ONLY THAT ROOKIE COULD BE FOOLED LIKE THAT,' HE SNARLED.

- 'IT HAD TO BE SOMEONE,' ELMBAUM PRONOUNCED, AS IF TO JUSTIFY IT. 'I RECRUITED HIM, AND HE WASN'T ON YOUR SHIP BY ACCIDENT.'

- 'AND HOW DID YOU MANAGE TO GET UNDER HIS SKIN?,' ASKED KENJI.

- I WAS SECRETLY DIRECTING HIS AMBITION. AS THE FIRST LINE OPERATOR ON MAKING THE JUMP, HE WANTED TO SHINE - IT WAS HER THAT RUINED HIM. HE JUST DIDN'T SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE. AND HE WAS WORKING FROM A TEMPLATE.

NOW KENJI HAD THE PUZZLE SORTED OUT. IT WAS MORE THAN OBVIOUS ELMBAUM HAD ERADICATED ANYTHING LIVING THAT HAD A CHANCE OF EVEN INDIRECTLY THREATENING HIM. HE HATED THE GOVERNOR EVEN MORE THEN, BUT HE ALSO ADMIRER HIM. HE WAS JUST TRYING TO SURVIVE. HE HAD ANTICIPATED SO MANY MOVES!

- SO THE WAR WAS NOT STARTED BY YOU IN THE TRUE SENSE OF THE WORD?' HE WHISPERED.

- 'EXACTLY,' REPLIED GORDON, 'BUT I STILL DON'T DENY THAT I'M GUILTY. I AM AWARE THAT I HAVE CAUSED TOO MUCH DEATH AND SUFFERING, YET I ASK NO MERCY.'

KENJI DECIDED THEN TO OPEN THE BOXES AND SEE WHAT THE GOVERNOR WAS HIDING IN THEM. THEY TURNED OUT TO BE RARE

SEMANTIC PHOTOGRAPHS OF HIM, HIS FAMILY, AND JACOB WALLACE WHILE HE WAS STILL HUMAN. NEXT TO THEM, HOWEVER, WAS A WOMAN KENJI DIDN'T RECOGNIZE. THEY WERE IN A VERY BEAUTIFUL PLACE. AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF THIS PARADISE, THEY WERE SMILING HAPPILY. KENJI THOUGHT TO HIMSELF, 'THEN GORDON OBVIOUSLY WASN'T GREEDY FOR MONEY OR POWER.'

## EPILOGUE

OUR ADVENTURERS HAVE REACHED THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. IT WAS LIKE PARADISE TO THE LOCALS, BUT TO THEM IT DIDN'T SEEM LIKE ANYTHING SPECIAL. THEY KNEW FULL WELL THAT EVERYTHING WAS GOING TO BE IN THEIR FAVOR SOONER OR LATER. THE COLONISTS FLATLY REFUSED A RETURN TO THEIR HOME PLANET, BUT LATER AGREED.

WHEN THEY ALL RETURNED, THEY SAW THAT ZEGANDARIA HAD TAKEN ON A MORE PLEASANT APPEARANCE THAN BEFORE. LEFT ALONE AND WITHOUT WARS, LUSH GREEN VEGETATION HAD COVERED THE PLANET. THERE WAS WATER ON ITS SURFACE AND IT SEEMED TO BE WAITING FOR THEM. OF COURSE THERE WAS STILL AN OVERWHELMINGLY DESERT NATURE. BUT THINGS IN THAT ASPECT WERE AS IF IN A POSITIVE SENSE. THE PLANET WAS NO LONGER HOSTILE TO ITS CHILDREN.

THE OSONIA JUDICIAL COMMISSION HAD UNANIMOUSLY DECIDED THAT GORDON ELMBAUM WAS GUILTY OF DELIBERATELY ORCHESTRATED GENOCIDE ON HIS HOME PLANET. WHEN HE WAS QUESTIONED THERE WAS ONE VERY INTERESTING QUESTION AMONG THE QUESTIONS, AND THAT WAS HOW EXACTLY HE HAD RECRUITED KEITH ENDWALKER AND HOW HE HAD BETRAYED THE DIOMEDES BASE. GORDON'S ANSWER WAS:

- KEITH IS A BOY WHO HAD PLAYED ON MY KNEES AS A KID. HE BASICALLY DOESN'T REMEMBER ME, THOUGH. HIS FATHER WAS

INDEBTED TO ME FOR GETTING HIS POSITION IN THE HOME OFFICE. IT'S TRUE THAT I BLACKMAILED HIM INTO HELPING ME. BUT HE WAS THE ONLY ONE WHO COULD GO THERE WITHOUT AROUSING SUSPICION. THE DISABLING OF THE BASE'S FIREWALL, HOWEVER, WAS NOT EXACTLY DONE BY HIM. HE GAVE THEM THE ACCESS PASSWORDS AT THE CHANGING OF THE GUARD. JACOB WALLACE OR ZARAG TU KNEW WELL HOW TO USE THE INFORMATION GIVEN AND HOW TO STRIKE AT THE RIGHT MOMENT. AND AS FOR THOSE WHO TALK ABOUT MORALITY, LET THEM KNOW THAT JAKE WAS JUST GETTING REVENGE FOR THE CARELESSNESS AND NEGLIGENCE SHOWN TOWARDS HIM. I SIMPLY USED IT ALL TO MY ADVANTAGE.

THEY TRANSPORTED HIM TO ZEGANDARIA, WHERE GORDON WAS CHARGED AND CONVICTED OF TWO HUNDRED AND NINETY-FOUR CRIMES OF VARIOUS KINDS. THE MAGISTRATES WONDERED WHETHER THEY SHOULD GIVE HIM THE CHOICE BETWEEN INSTANT DEATH, BEING SHOT INTO A SPACE CAPSULE, OR SIMPLY IMPRISONING HIM IN THE NOTORIOUS SHOR TUK PRISON, NOT FAR FROM OZIN TUN. GORDON WAS INDIFFERENT. HE HAD FALLEN INTO A RATHER PECULIAR STATE AFTER LEARNING OF THE DEMISE OF HIS ONLY TWO RELATIVES. IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO DESCRIBE EXACTLY WHAT HE WAS FEELING. THE FORMER GOVERNOR HAD SHUT HIMSELF COMPLETELY IN AND ALLOWED NO ONE INTO HIS THOUGHTS. IT HAD TAKEN SOME TIME, HOWEVER, DURING WHICH TIME HE HAD BEEN PUT IN THE ARMOR OF SEVA. SEVA WAS ACTUALLY JACOB WALLACE'S DEAD WIFE, CATHERINE WALLACE, WHO HAD FOUGHT SIDE BY SIDE WITH HIM AND HIS TRANSFORMED SOLDIERS. IT HAD AN INSTANT EFFECT. GORDON TURNED GREEN AND EVERYTHING JUST LASTED A FEW SECONDS BEFORE HE REGAINED HIS NORMAL FLESH COLOR. NOTHING ELSE HAPPENED. HE JUST STAYED LIKE THAT FOR A WHILE, BUT IT WAS LIKE HE WAS NUMB. WHEN HE CAME TO, HIS DNA WAS COMPLETELY ALTERED ACCORDING TO THE TESTS THEY DID ON HIM. THIS ONLY COMPOUNDED HIS SENTENCE WITH ANOTHER CRIME LIKE MISAPPROPRIATION OF ANOTHER'S IDENTITY AND APPROPRIATION OF ANOTHER'S GENES.



GORDON'S WISH CAME TRUE THOUGH, AND AFTER HIS DEATH SENTENCE WAS CARRIED OUT, HIS ASHES WERE SCATTERED OVER ZEGANDARIA. GORDON WAS PUT TO DEATH BY CONFINEMENT IN AN AIRTIGHT CHAMBER AND GASSING WITH LETHAL AMBRAN GAS. JUST THE KIND THAT OUR ADVENTURERS WOULD HAVE DIED FROM. MANY WERE RELUCTANT TO GO TO THE EXECUTION, BUT THOSE WHO DID ATTEND AGREED COMPLETELY THAT HE GOT WHAT HE DESERVED. HIS DEMISE DID NOT ELICIT A DROP OF SYMPATHY. OF COURSE THERE WERE A FEW FAMILIES FROM OSONIA THAT HE HAD HELPED IN TIME. THEIR HEIRS HAD COME TO EXPRESS THEIR GRATITUDE, BUT THEY TOO WERE SHOCKED TO LEARN WHO HE REALLY WAS.

ADMIRAL SPEARS AND ELIZANDRA DIONNE WERE MARRIED. THEY HAD BEEN BATTLE COMRADES FOR SO MANY YEARS. THEIR MARRIAGE BECAME ONE OF THE CENTRAL EVENTS. ELIZANDRA WAS SO ELEGANT IN HER DRESS. IT WAS DEFINITELY AN UNFORGETTABLE MOMENT.

GABRIELLE MOURNED HER BELOVED DISLAN FOR A LONG TIME, BUT LATER REALIZED IT WAS JUST A CHILDISH WHIM AND HE WAS NOT HER ROLE MODEL. SHE DEVOTED HERSELF TO SCHOLARSHIP AND DESCRIBED THE HISTORY OF ZEGANDARIA FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

KENJI STAYED BEHIND TO INSPECT LABOR COLONY 206, AS THERE WERE MANY THINGS THAT WERE NOT PUT AWAY. AS MANY AS SIX EXPEDITIONS HAD GONE TO THE PLANET ZIRUL TAN, WHERE IT WAS ACTUALLY LOCATED. ON ONE OF THOSE EXPEDITIONS HE DISCOVERED WHAT HAD REALLY HAPPENED TO RICHWATER. IT WAS TRUE THAT THE OTHER PRISONERS HAD RELAYED TO HIM HOW HE HAD INITIALLY BEEN CONSIDERED A TRAITOR AND SUBJECTED TO WHAT WAS KNOWN AS THE 'PRISON WELCOME'. THAT VERY NIGHT HE DEVELOPED A FEVER BECAUSE OF THE CRUEL INJURIES ON HIS BODY. BUT NO ONE HAD ANY RECOLLECTION OF EXACTLY WHERE IT WAS, AS THERE HAD BEEN TOO MANY KILLED IN THE RIOT AND ONE OF THEM WAS HIM. ON HIS FIRST VISIT TO ZIRUL TAN KENJI DIDN'T HAVE TIME TO LOOK AROUND AT ALL THE VICTIMS, BUT ON THE SECOND VISIT,

WHICH WAS AFTER ABOUT THREE MONTHS OF SUBJECTIVE TIME, HE WAS ABLE TO FIND HIM. HE WAS LYING DISCARDED UNDER ONE OF THE GUARDS' XENTARS. HIS FACE WAS HALF-SMUDGED. KENJI CHECKED WITH AN ELECTRONIC FACE SCANNER TO SEE IF IT WAS INDEED HIM. THERE WAS NO DOUBT. HIS IDENTITY WAS CONFIRMED. THEN THEY TRANSPORTED HIS BODY AND BURIED IT ON THE NATIVE ZEGANDARIA. WHEN KENJI DUG THROUGH THE AKUSTRO ARCHIVES, HE WAS CONVINCED THAT DESPITE THE BRUTAL TORTURE, HE HADN'T BETRAYED A SINGLE MILITARY SECRET. BECAUSE OF HIS BRAVERY AND FAITHFUL SERVICE, HE WAS AWARDED THE 'ORDER OF POSTHUMOUS SERVICE' AND WAS SENT ON HIS FINAL EARTHLY JOURNEY WITH FULL HONORS.

HILDA ERENGALES, DOUG ENLOW AND ALL THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE ENSORIA CREW WERE ALSO HONORED. THEY BURIED THEIR CASTS, CAREFULLY STORED IN A SPECIAL CONTAINER.

BECKY DIDN'T REUNITE WITH MEIOR AND EVERYONE JUST WENT THEIR SEPARATE WAYS. BECKY GAVE HERSELF OVER TO JOURNALISM. MEIOR TO WRITING.

PARTICULARLY SIGNIFICANT WAS THE MOMENT SHE MET HER BROTHER, DURNYAM. IT TURNED OUT THAT HIS SPECIAL ABILITY TO SEE SO MANY THINGS WAS PARTLY DUE TO HIS RELATIONSHIP WITH HIS TWIN SISTER. THEIR GODPARENTS WERE THE ARCHANEANS THEMSELVES, WHO HOPED THAT THROUGH THEM THE OMEN OF THEIR SALVATION WOULD BE FULFILLED. AND THEY WERE NOT MISTAKEN. WITHOUT THEIR HELP, THERE WAS NO TELLING WHAT THE OUTCOME OF THE WAR WOULD HAVE BEEN.

SASIA CONTINUED HER CAREER AS A PILOT. SHE BECAME AN INSTRUCTOR - WHICH WAS HER DREAM. THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED UNIT UNDER HER COMMAND DID RECONNAISSANCE PATROLS IN CLOSE ORBIT AROUND THE PLANET TO KEEP IT SAFE.

CAPTAIN PENROSE HELPED IMMENSELY IN THE TRANSPORT WORK. SINCE THE ZEGANDARIAN HIGH COUNCIL HAD LONG SINCE CEASED TO EXIST AS A GOVERNING BODY, IT WAS NOW DIRECTLY

SUBORDINATE TO NO ONE. IN FACT, IT WAS ALL JUST A FORMALITY, BUT TO HIM THAT WAS ALL THAT MATTERED.

LATER, A SPECIAL MEMORIAL WAS ESTABLISHED IN MEMORY OF ALL THOSE WHO HAD DIED DURING ZEGANDARIA'S TOO-LONG WAR. ZORIN ESTABLISHED A MILITARY ACADEMY FOR PEACEFUL PURPOSES. MARK AND HIS FRIENDS BECAME WAR HEROES.

WHEN THEY MET SASIA, THEY EMBRACED, BUT THERE WOULD NEVER BE ANYTHING MORE BETWEEN THEM THAN AN EXTRAORDINARILY STRONG CHILDHOOD AFFECTION AND FRIENDSHIP. MARK HAD TO ADMIT THAT SOME PEOPLE JUST HAD A BIT MORE OF A SPECIAL MISSION THAN OTHERS, AND MAYBE THEY WEREN'T MEANT TO BE TOGETHER AS SPOUSES. ESPECIALLY WHEN THEY WERE SUPPOSED TO BE SAVING THE ENTIRE PLANET FROM CERTAIN DOOM. BUT HE KNEW HE WOULDN'T HAVE MADE IT IF IT HADN'T BEEN FOR PAUL, SAM WALLACE, FATHER, RAT, GRANDPA JACK AND EVERYONE ELSE. AS WELL AS THE UNQUESTIONING DEVOTION OF THAT BRAVE WOMAN PILOT. WHEN HE SAW HER IN FRONT OF THE NEWLY BUILT MILITARY ACADEMY, MARK CHEERFULLY BECKONED HER OVER:

- REMEMBER THOSE CHASES THROUGH THE STREETS OF ENSARIAN? NOW WE MUST SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE TO FUTURE GENERATIONS. THEY ARE COUNTING ON US.

WAR WAS OFFICIALLY BANNED ON THE ENTIRE PLANET. GOVERNOR ELMBAUM'S MONEY WAS GOING TO BE ENOUGH TO REBUILD ALMOST THE ENTIRE INFRASTRUCTURE FIRST. AND THERE WAS ALMOST NO TRACE OF IT LEFT. ONE OF THE ENGINEERS FROM OROS HINTO HAD AGREED TO HELP WITH HIS TECHNICAL EXPERTISE. HE HAD BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR INTRODUCING THE TACHYON ENGINES TO THE GENERAL POPULATION, FOR CONSTRUCTING HIGH-SPEED ARSINAEAN TUNNELS BENEATH THE PLANET'S SURFACE TO CONNECT THE PREVIOUSLY DESTROYED POLIS, AS WELL AS OTHER LOCAL AND MORE REMOTE AREAS.

HAD ANDREW DISLAN LIVED HE WOULD HAVE UNDOUBTEDLY BEEN OF USE, BUT HE WAS TRANSPORTED BACK TO ZEGANDARIA AND HIS

ASHES WERE ALSO SCATTERED INTO THE AIR, MUCH LIKE HIS GRANDFATHER'S.

NEOLA REMAINED VIRTUALLY IN A MILITARY HOSPITAL THAT HAD BEEN SET UP AT ZORIN'S ACADEMY.

SHE DID NOT FORGET THE GOOD ONE-EYED UNCLE ZENGAR WHO HAD PLAYED SUCH AN IMPORTANT ROLE IN THIS WAR. EVERY TIME SHE EXAMINED A PATIENT, HE SEEMED TO COME INTO VIEW AND GAILY STARE AT HER WITH HIS SINGLE EYE.

ONE DAY SHE FOUND AN ELECTRONIC NOTEBOOK SHE HAD TAKEN WITH HER WHEN THEY LEFT RODWELL. IT WAS SO SMALL THAT NO ONE HAD NOTICED IT. SHORTLY BEFORE SHE DIED, UNCLE ZENGAR HAD SCRIBBLED SOMETHING ON IT. SHE STRUGGLED TO READ HIS REVEALED HANDWRITING:

'TO MY NEOLA. THE DAUGHTER WHO NEVER KNEW OF MY EXISTENCE. THE DAUGHTER WHO, TO SECRETLY WATCH OVER AND PROTECT, I WAS FORCED TO MOVE WITH THE STABLE. THE DAUGHTER I GAVE UP TO THAT FOSTER FAMILY WHO REVOKED MY CARE OF HER. LET IT BE KNOWN THAT GOOD OLD UNCLE ZENGAR, WHO DISCOVERED ENDUOCLE'S TREACHERY, PROTECTED SASIA AND BROUGHT HER TO HIM TO DELIVER HER! THAT WILL EASE HIS CONSCIENCE FOR THE YEARS HE HAS MISSED, AND FOR THE MANY OTHER MISTAKES HE HAS MADE IN HIS LIFE. FORGIVE HIM!'

AS SHE READ THESE LINES, NEOLA QUIETLY SHED A FEW TEARS. APPARENTLY SHE KNEW SO LITTLE ABOUT HIM. AS A TOKEN OF APPRECIATION FOR HIS DEED, SHE MADE SURE THAT EVERYONE KNEW OF HIS KINDNESS. UNCLE ZENGAR WOULD NEVER BE FORGOTTEN! HE WAS THE TRUE SAVIOR OF ZEGANDARIA!

KEITH ENDOWOCLE WAS PUBLICLY CENSURED FOR HIS TREACHERY, BUT IN VIEW OF HIS MERITS, ESCAPED THE DEATH SENTENCE. HE RECOUNTED EXACTLY HOW HE HAD BEEN RECRUITED BY THE GOVERNOR, WHO HAD BLACKMAILED HIM WITH THE FACT THAT HE WOULD KILL HIS PARENTS THROUGH HIS HENCHMEN FROM AMONG

THE 'GHOST' WARRIORS. KEITH WAS DETERMINED TO SAVE HIS PARENTS, EVEN AT THE COST OF SUCH A DASTARDLY ACT. HE SERVED HIS PUNISHMENT IN A PRISON ON ZEGANDARIA, FROM WHERE HE EMERGED AN OLD MAN OF ALMOST NINETY-THREE AFTER MORE THAN SIXTY-FIVE YEARS IN PRISON. WHILE IN PRISON HE OFTEN THOUGHT OF HIS OLD FRIEND MAJOR KETROWL. HIS OLD COMRADE'S WISE WORDS WERE RUNNING THROUGH HIS MIND, 'DON'T LET THE CURRENT MOMENT FOOL YOU THIS WAR DIDN'T START WITH US IT WON'T END WITH US.' KEITH HAD REPEATED THIS TO HIMSELF A BILLION TIMES, WATCHING THE DAMP WALL, TRYING TO FIND SOME NEW MEANING IN THEM EACH TIME. BUT SOMETHING SEEMED TO PREVENT HIM FROM LOOKING BEYOND. THE STRANGE THING WAS THAT INSIDE HIS MIND HE COULD CLEARLY SENSE SOMETHING. IT WAS THE SPIRIT OF CHANGE. THERE WAS NO AVOIDING IT. AS HE LAY IN PRISON, THE WORLD OUTSIDE WAS SLOWLY AND IMPERCEPTIBLY CHANGING-FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE IT WAS HARD TO TELL, BUT IT WAS CHANGING. ALL THIS COULD NOT HELP BUT HAVE AN IMPACT ON HIS MIND. WHERE WOULD HE GO NEXT? AND THERE WERE STILL SO MANY YEARS LEFT OF HIS SENTENCE. TOO MANY YEARS. HE HAD TO SERVE THEM OUT. ALONE AND WELL INSULATED FROM THE LURKING DANGERS OUTSIDE.

ONE DAY THERE WAS A KNOCK AT THE HYDRON DOOR. THE HAND KNOCKING ON THE OTHER SIDE WAS CONFIDENT AND OBVIOUSLY KNEW WHAT IT WANTED. SOMEWHERE INSIDE KEITH ENDWALKER GATHERED HIS THOUGHTS AND REALIZED THAT JUST THE BEGINNING OF HIS NEW LIFE SEEMED TO BE BEGINNING. UNLIKE MANY OTHER POLITICAL PRISONERS, HE HAD NOT GONE MAD OR LOST HOPE. IF HE WAS LUCKY HE COULD SEE THE DAWN AGAIN. AT LEAST ONE LAST TIME! SOMEWHERE OUT THERE HE COULD FIND SALVATION! AND FORGIVE HIMSELF!

AS SOON AS THE DOOR SLAMMED BEHIND HIM, HE REALIZED THAT HE HAD YET TO FACE AN EXISTENCE MUCH MORE DIFFICULT THAN THE SAD BUT RELATIVELY PREDICTABLE ONE IN PRISON. AND THERE WAS SOMETHING ELSE - NO ONE REMEMBERED HIM AND NO ONE NEEDED HIM.

HE TRIED TO LOOK IN A DIGITAL MIRROR AND COULDN'T RECOGNIZE HIMSELF. 'IS THAT ME?' HE WONDERED. - 'IS IT POSSIBLE?' HIS HEART FLUTTERED, BUT HE KNEW THE ANSWER WELL. HE WAS STILL ALIVE. ALBEIT ALL ALONE. BUT AT LEAST HE KNEW WHAT HE WANTED. HE WANTED TO START OVER. HE HAD TO LEARN TO LIVE WITH HIMSELF UNDER NEW CONDITIONS. AND MAYBE EVERYTHING WOULD FALL INTO PLACE. KEITH HAD FRIENDS IN THE PAST. THE LAUGHS WITH MARK, SASIA AND THE OTHERS HAD REMAINED A DISTANT DREAM. WHAT A ROMANTIC PERIOD IT HAD BEEN ALONE! AND NOW HE WAS GOING TO BUILD HIS FUTURE WITH ONLY HIS TWO HANDS. HE DIDN'T HAVE THAT MUCH TO LOSE. HE WAS AN OLD MAN, BUT HIS MIND WAS ENLIGHTENED AND HE WANTED TO LIVE THE LAST MOMENTS OF HIS LIFE WITH DIGNITY. FOR THE FIRST TIME, HE CLEARLY REALIZED THAT THERE WAS NO HAPPINESS OR UNHAPPINESS, BUT A SUBJECTIVE VIEW OF THIS LIFE AND THAT DISTANT 'PICTURE' THAT HAD IMPRINTED ITSELF DEEP IN HIS MIND DEFINITELY DID NOT CORRESPOND TO REALITY. SAD, BUT A FACT! AT LEAST HE WAS HONEST WITH HIMSELF! AND NOW BOLDLY FORWARD! THERE WAS NO TIME TO WASTE!

THEN HE LEFT ZEGANDARIA ABOARD SOME SHUTTLE AND NO ONE SAW HIM AGAIN.

KEITH MARRIED AND HIS SON BECAME A PROMINENT PUBLIC FIGURE, ALTHOUGH HE DID NOT LIVE TO SEE HIS FATHER AS HE DIED VERY YOUNG. UNLIKE HIS LIFE, WHICH WAS FILLED WITH TUMULTUOUS MISHAPS, HE HAD A RELATIVELY HAPPY LIFE AND A CAREER MARKED WITH SUCCESS. HE FULLY RECEIVED PUBLIC RECOGNITION FOR HIS WORK AS A ZEGANDARIAN LAWYER AND TRIED TO ALLEVIATE HIS PARENT'S SUFFERING AS BEST HE COULD.

THIS WAS AT LEAST A PARTIAL CONSOLATION FOR HIS IMPRISONED FATHER. IF ANYONE HAD ASKED HIM WHAT HE HAD LEARNED FROM IT, HE WOULD HAVE ANSWERED UNEQUIVOCALLY THAT ONE HAD TO TAKE ONE'S DUTY, WHATEVER CAME AFTER.

ACUSTRO RECEIVED PUNISHMENT FOR HIS CRIMES, WHICH WERE CERTAINLY SEVERE. HE WAS CAPTURED AND QUESTIONED BY MANY MAGISTRATES. THEY UNANIMOUSLY DECIDED TO PUNISH HIM

HARSHLY AND HE WAS EXECUTED IN THE SAME WAY HE HAD DEALT WITH HIS VICTIMS. HE WAS TIED NAKED ON A HUGE ZEGANDARIAN CRYSTAL, WHICH THEY GLOWED WHITE. THE MOANS AND SCREAMS DID NOTHING FOR THE STERN LOOK AND IMAGE HE HAD BUILT UP FOR HIMSELF IN FRONT OF THE OTHER PRISONERS. ACUSTRO WASN'T GOING TO BE THE BLOODSUCKING VAMPIRE OF LABOR COLONY 206. NEVER AGAIN!

VIAR'S CORPSE WAS NOT FORGOTTEN EITHER. OF COURSE, GOVERNOR ELMBAUM DIDN'T LIVE TO SEE IT, AS HE HAD BEEN EXECUTED EARLIER. KENJI HAD STOWED HIM AWAY WITH THE OTHERS. HOWEVER, AS HE LOOKED AT HIS DEAD EYES, DISFIGURED FACE, AND TWISTED FINGERS, KENJI WONDERED IF THE MAN HAD REALIZED WHY HE HAD PRACTICALLY LIVED. THEY LAID HIS CORPSE BESIDE THE SPECIAL SPACE URN CONTAINING THE ASHES OF HIS SON, ANDREW DISLAN. THAT WAY, AT LEAST IN THE AFTERLIFE, THE TWO OF THEM WOULD BE CLOSE TO EACH OTHER. A MEMORIAL WAS ERECTED TO VIAR TO REMIND HIM OF HIS ATROCITIES ON THE COLONY. A BUST OF ACUSTRO COULD ALSO BE SEEN BESIDE IT. THOUGH CONSTRUCTED OF THE PUREST AND NOBLEST ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE, THE FIGURES LOOKED AS IF THEY DID NOT KNOW EACH OTHER, BUT SOME COMMON CAUSE HELD THEM TOGETHER.

JACOB WALLACE LED THE GUARRONS, AS HE HAD EARLIER. PRINCE NUNDRAG AND KIER ZOH BECAME BROTHERS AGAIN. NO LONGER WOULD THE THRONE OF UGROK SIN SEPARATE THEM. THE FEW SURVIVING GUARRONS TRIED TO COEXIST WITH THE HUMANS, THOUGH AT FIRST THEY ORGANIZED THEIR OWN SETTLEMENTS.

SAM WALLACE MET WITH HIS FATHER. ZARAG TU'S EYES AND HIS MET. JACOB IMMEDIATELY RECOGNIZED HIS YOUNGEST SON.

- I MANAGED TO HIDE IT IN TIME BEFORE ALL THIS STARTED. BUT HE DIDN'T SHAME HIS FATHER. HE FOLLOWED MY ORDERS STRICTLY AND FOUGHT TO THE END. SAMI IS A GLORIOUS BOY!

- 'HURRAH!,' THE BROTHERS CRIED, ONE OF THE FEW WORDS OF HUMAN SPEECH THEY HAD LEARNED.

RAS TIAN WAS HAPPILY MARRIED TO THE YOUNGER OF THE BROTHERS, WHOSE EYES SHE HAD ONCE OPENED TO THE FACT THAT IT WAS NOT DONE BY MERE FLAUNTING AND DEADLY HATRED. IT WAS AS IF SHE HAD REJUVENATED HERSELF SO MUCH. THE ALLEGORICAL STORY OF THE GODDESS AND MARAS TULBA'S INCARNATION IN HER HAD OPENED THE EYES OF MANY, IF ONLY FOR A MOMENT. RAS TIAN WAS HELD IN SPECIAL ESTEEM, ESPECIALLY WHEN IT CAME TO RESTORING THE DIGNITY OF THE GUARRON. EVENTUALLY EVERYTHING WAS FALLING INTO PLACE.

THE ARCHANAYANS RETURNED TO THEIR HOME PLANET AND AFTER A THOROUGH INSPECTION WERE ALLOWED TO RETURN TO THEIR HOMELANDS IN THE MISTY MOUNTAINS. THERE THEY HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIVE AS THEIR ANCESTORS AND PRESERVE SOME OF THE LOST KNOWLEDGE FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS.

REONA BECAME THE NEW LEADER OF A STUDENT MOVEMENT TO GIVE THIS SEGMENT OF THE POPULATION A VOICE. SHE DID MUCH TO ORGANIZE THE GENERAL PUBLIC ON MANY IMPORTANT ISSUES.

HISS WAS NOT FORGOTTEN BY HER FRIENDS. IT COULD BE SAID THAT HE SAVED THEM WHEN THE SOLDIERS HAD DRIVEN THEM AWAY. THEY DRANK IN HIS MEMORY AND ERECTED A SPECIAL MEMORIAL WHERE HE WAS HONORED AS A MARTYRED HERO.

DURNYAM, IN HIS ROLE AS LEADER OF MARK'S GROUP, HAD BECOME THE MORAL TEACHER OF THE NEW ZEGANDARIAN GENERATION.

ROYAN WAS ABLE TO SEE HIS FATHER. PINDOR WAS STILL IN A WAKING COMA FROM WHICH HE WAS UNLIKELY EVER TO EMERGE. BUT THE BOY CALMED EVEN AT THE SIGHT OF HIM. SHE COULD STILL SPEAK TO HIM FROM TIME TO TIME AND HOPED HE COULD HEAR. ROIAN BEGAN HIS ILLUSTRIOUS ORATORICAL CAREER ACROSS ZEGANDARIA TO SHOW ALL THE SURVIVORS HOW THE FREE SPIRIT COULD OVERCOME ANYTHING. HE DIDN'T FORGET PRIVATE



SUMMERS, WHO HAD HELPED HIM SURVIVE. SHE HAD BECOME LIKE A SECOND MOTHER TO HIM. OR RATHER, AN OLDER SISTER. SHE'D FORMALLY CLAIMED CUSTODY OF HIM WHENEVER POSSIBLE.

FINALLY, LIROITH, JONATHAN HEARNS, AND ALL THE SURVIVING POLITICAL PRISONERS HAD REVIVED SCIENCE ON THE PLANET. NO ONE COULD STOP FREE ENERGY FROM BECOMING AVAILABLE TO EVERYONE ANYMORE. THE INEXHAUSTIBLE AMOUNTS EXTRACTED FROM THE VACUUM OF SPACE MADE SOME OF THE PLANET'S RESOURCES LESS VALUABLE AND IN DEMAND. INSTEAD, EVERYONE COULD NOW FEEL HAPPY AND FREE. EVEN THE PLANET'S AIR WAS NOW BREATHABLE. THIS REVOLUTIONARY DISCOVERY OF LIROUT CHANGED ITS APPEARANCE COMPLETELY.

PRINCESS MIERU, THE LEADER OF THE MYERANIANS, TREATED THEIR NEW HOME WITH CARE AND ATTENTION. SHE WELL REMEMBERED THE THIRTY YEARS OF VASSAL SUBJECTION UNDER WHICH HER RACE HAD PAID ENORMOUS DUES TO GORDON ELMBAUM AND OBEYED HIM FOR EVERYTHING. THE MOMENT OF PAYBACK LINGERED IN THE PSYCHE OF THE MYERANIANS. THEY HAD ACTED NOT AS VENGEFUL CREATURES, BUT AS OPPRESSED ONES. IT WAS NOT AN ACT OF NOBILITY, BUT A RIGHTEOUS QUEST FOR A NEW LIFE. SOMEWHERE DEEP INSIDE, THE LITTLE PRINCESS AGREED THAT GORDON HAD BEEN FORCED TO ACT THIS WAY BY CIRCUMSTANCES, BUT THEY WERE ALSO ACTING THIS WAY BECAUSE OF THOSE SAME CIRCUMSTANCES.

A TRUCE HAD BEEN REACHED WITH CYCLO TO, THE ORACLE-SOVEREIGN OF THE PLANET SEBUR NAG. THE DEAD SEBURNACIANS - NO MORE THAN TWO OR THREE HUNDRED - HAD BEEN AWARDED PLANETARY HONORS. THEY HAD DONE THEIR DUTY WITH DIGNITY. DEEP DOWN, HOWEVER, THE MYERANIANS CONTINUED THEIR ISOLATED WAY OF LIFE. THEY ALLOTTED THEM CONSIDERABLE SPACE IN THE SIMOR SIN VALLEY, WELL AWAY FROM THE CAPITAL CITY OF NARAS TU, AND GAVE THEM A SOLEMN PROMISE THAT THEY WOULD NOT INTERFERE WITH THEIR DEVELOPMENT AS LONG AS THEY DID NOT DESTROY THE PLANET'S RESOURCES OR CAUSE DISORDER.

THE MYERANIANS AGREED. THE MIERU BEGAN TO UNDERSTAND THAT THEIR PURELY CONSUMERIST-PREDATORY MINDSET HAD TO BE PERMANENTLY CONSIGNED TO THE PAST IF THEY WERE TO SURVIVE INTO THE FUTURE. FAR AHEAD - INTO THE UNFORESEEABLE FUTURE.

AND WHAT HAPPENED TO AUSLANDER? WELL HARDLY ANYONE REMEMBERED HIM, EXCEPT KENJI AND A FEW OTHER PEOPLE WHO WITNESSED THE CONVERSATION WITH ELMBAUM. HANS AUSLANDER HAD LIVED LIKE A TRAITOR, ACTED LIKE A TRAITOR, AND FINALLY JUST DIED LIKE A TRAITOR. IT WAS SO NATURAL. THE DEEP QUALITIES OF A TRAITOR REMAIN SO TO THE VERY END. HE WAS FORCED TO ACT OUT OF HIS OWN MOTIVES AS WELL. THE TRUTH WAS THAT SOME PEOPLE SIMPLY HAD NOTHING ELSE TO SHINE WITH. SUCH WAS THE CASE WITH AUSLANDER.

ENNIO HAMMER SENT HIMSELF INTO EXILE. THERE HE COULD COLLECT HIS WRONG THOUGHTS. THERE SHE WOULD REMEMBER MIERU AND WHAT HE HAD DONE TO HER. THERE THE HATRED FOR HIS ENEMY ANDREW DISLAN WOULD BURN HIM. IT WAS PERFECTLY NORMAL FOR HIM TO STAY ON SOME LONELY PLANET AND TRY TO SURVIVE ON HIS OWN, OR JUST VEGETATE IN THE SPARSELY POPULATED PART OF SOME OTHER PLANET. BUT WHAT KIND OF LIFE WOULD THAT HAVE BEEN? THE CREW OF THE SPACE SECOND RING SCATTERED IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS. MILITARY DISCIPLINE COULD NOT HOLD THE MEN, GIVEN THAT THE MILITARY FACILITY IN QUESTION NO LONGER EXISTED AND THEIR COMMANDER WAS GIVING THEM VAGUE AND OBSCURE ORDERS, NOT OUT OF DUTY, BUT OUT OF SELF-INTEREST.

ONE EVENING ENNIO HAMMER WAS ENCOUNTERED BY A GROUP OF FRENZIED MARAUDERS ON ONE OF THE SPARSELY POPULATED PLANETS BEYOND THE DVEST QUADRANT. HE WAS TRYING TO SURVIVE, THOUGH HE HAD LONG SINCE BECOME A MENTAL WRECK AND IMAGES OF THE PAST KEPT SURFACING BEFORE HIS EYES. THE PLANET DIDN'T EVEN HAVE A REAL NAME, BUT BORE AN ALPHANUMERIC DESIGNATION - CFRG 1583. HE HAD VISITED A SMALL INN, AS THE POPULATION INHABITED SIMPLE ZERVILONS THAT

HAD AN EVEN SIMPLER CONSTRUCTION THAN THE XENTARI. THE PLANET'S ATMOSPHERE WAS TOO RICH IN VARIOUS VAPORS SO STANDING OUTSIDE THE WELL INSULATED ZERVILONS WAS NOT ADVISABLE. ENNIO WAS GRIPPED WITH MELANCHOLY TOWARDS HIS FORMER POWER, BUT HIS INSTINCT FOR SELF-PRESERVATION WAS STILL WORKING FLAWLESSLY. HE ROSE TO GO. WHILE HE WAS IN THE TAVERN A NUMBER OF MALICIOUS GLANCES SHOT HIM, BUT WHEN HE WANTED TO MEET THEM WITH A LOOK OF DIGNITY THEY AVOIDED HIM. HE FELT THEY WERE ABOUT TO DESTROY HIM. THIS TIME FOR GOOD. PERHAPS SOME RUMOR HAD REACHED HIM EVEN HERE. HE HADN'T STAYED IN ONE PLACE LONG SINCE HE'D ESCAPED WITH THE CREW. HE'D TRAVELED TO A SUM OF PLANETS, SOME MORE BACKWATER AND DESERTED THAN OTHERS. BUT NOWHERE COULD HE FIND A SAFE HAVEN. A DRUNKEN ARGUMENT BROKE OUT ON THE WAY OUT, WHICH ESCALATED INTO A BRUTAL BRAWL. ENNIO WAS DEFENDING HIMSELF. HE WOUNDED ONE, THEN A SECOND, EVEN A THIRD WITH HIS LASER CUTTER. BUT THE FOURTH DROVE A PIECE OF EULORAST INTO HIS SUIT'S SPLINTER TO CAUSE DECOMPRESSION. THE RESULT WASN'T LONG IN COMING, AND THOUGH THE SUIT REPAIRED ITSELF, AS THE DAMAGE DONE WASN'T SEVERE, VERY SOON HE BEGAN TO SUFFOCATE FROM LACK OF OXYGEN, BECAUSE THEY HAD AFFECTED THE COMPRESSED AIR ASPIRATION SYSTEM. THIS MADE HIS MOVEMENTS SLUGGISH AND UNCOORDINATED. ONE FINAL BLAST OF ELMOSATOR THERMOPLASTIC FINISHED HIM OFF FOR GOOD. HE WAS KILLED AND THE REMAINS OF HIS BODY SCATTERED IN DIFFERENT DIRECTIONS.

- 'LOOK AT HIM, HE WAS A VERY IMPORTANT EX-MILITARY MAN,' SAID ONE OF THE UNCOUTH MEN WHO WERE MOLESTING HIS CORPSE. 'WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR HERE?'

- 'WE'D BETTER GET OUT OF HERE, BECAUSE WHO KNOWS WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN TO US,' SAID HIS COMRADE. 'AT LEAST WE TOOK HIS VALUABLES.'

- 'WELL, THEY WEREN'T MUCH,' LAUGHED THE OTHER. 'BUT YOU'RE RIGHT, IT'S NOT SAFE HERE.'

THEIR FOOTSTEPS FADED INTO THE DISTANCE. ENNIO WAS DEAD, HIS LIFELESS EYES BULGING. THE GLASS OF HIS SPACESUIT WAS SHATTERED. IN THE REFLECTION OF THE VIEWFINDER, THE RECEDING SILHOUETTES WERE VISIBLE. IT WAS TOO SAD TO DIE ALONE AND ABANDONED. THE ONE WHO HAD CAUSED SO MUCH HARM TO THE PEOPLE OF THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA. HERE, AT LEAST, HIS BODY COULD FIND REST. FOREVER! THE ALL TOO BANAL DECAY OF A MAN LIKE HAMMER WAS PERHAPS ALL TOO INSTRUCTIVE, AS THIS MAN HAD ONCE CONTROLLED THE ENTIRE SKIES OF ZEGANDARIA. THERE - HIGH IN THE SKY - HE HAD FELT LIKE A GOD. AND NOW, LYING DOWN ON THE GROUND, HE WAS MUCH CLOSER TO THE WORMS. BUT THERE WEREN'T EVEN ANY WORMS ON THIS PLANET BECAUSE OF THE WEATHER CONDITIONS!

THERE WAS A LASTING PEACE ON ZEGANDARIA BECAUSE THE PLANET WAS BEGINNING ITS NEW LIFE. NOW UNFETTERED BY THE STRUGGLES OF THE PAST, TRADE HAD INTENSIFIED AND MANY OF THE FEW SURVIVORS WERE BEGINNING TO REALIZE HOW SMALL A PART OF THE GALAXY THEY WERE. THEY CONSIDERED THEIR PLANET TOO SPECIAL, BUT MANY OTHER RACES CAME INTO CONTACT WITH THEM. IT TURNED OUT THAT GORDON HAD BEEN IN CONTACT WITH THEM MUCH EARLIER AS WELL. BUT NOW IT WAS DIFFERENT! THE RACES OF OZ TU NAL, THE FIDDLE PEOPLE (THEIR REAL NAME WAS ERZONIANS), AND MANY OTHERS WERE THEIR FRIENDS, EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE AT AN INDESCRIBABLY GREAT DISTANCE FROM THEIR PLANET. NOW THEY COULD ALL LOOK TO THE STARS IN PEACE. FOR THEY WERE AT HOME. IT WAS THE TIME OF THE NEW CHILDREN OF ZEGANDARIA. AS WELL AS ALL THOSE WHO WOULD BE BORN AFTER THEM. THE TIME OF US ALL!

AS THEY SETTLED THE PROBLEMS OF THEIR HOME PLANET, THEY DECIDED TO EXPLORE THE SPACE BEYOND THE UNKNOWN QUADRANT. OF COURSE KENJI, MARK, PAUL, SASIA AND ALL THE OTHERS WERE LONG GONE AMONG THE LIVING. THEIR DESCENDANTS DID, AND SO DID THE HEIRS OF THEIR HEIRS. MANY GENERATIONS CONTRIBUTED TO MAKING THIS HAPPEN. IT WAS NOT WITHOUT SURPRISE THAT THEY DISCOVERED THAT A WHOLE NEW UNIVERSE

BEGAN FROM THERE! APPARENTLY THE UNIVERSAL VOICE HAD BEEN PROTECTING THEM ALL THIS TIME!

A NEW STORY WAS BEGINNING, THE SUBJECT OF A MORE ELEVATED CONSCIOUSNESS, BUT THAT IS A STORY FOR ANOTHER DAY.

**END**

## AUTHOR'S NOTES:

1. AN ALLUSION IS MADE THAT THE HEROINE FITS A LONELY AND QUIET PLACE LIKE THIS.
2. THE WORD DEMON COMES FROM GREEK AND UNTIL THE 5TH CENTURY B.C. MEANT ONLY 'GOD', 'DEITY'. AN ALLUSION IS MADE TO DISLAN'S ABILITY TO ESCAPE FROM ANY TRAPS HIS ADVERSARIES SET.
3. THE GOD THORNUS IS A FICTIONAL GOD OF THE MYERANIANS. HE APPEARS AS AN UNSPECIFIED SUPERIOR CREATURE WITH SLIGHTLY HUMAN FEATURES, BUT MYERANIANS FEATURES, WHICH ARE LARGE EYES AND FAIR SKIN.
4. THE PARSEC IS APPROXIMATELY EQUAL TO 3.26 LIGHT YEARS.
5. MAGNETARS - NEUTRON STARS WITH MAGNETIC FIELDS.
6. IMPLOSION - A PROCESS IN WHICH OBJECTS ARE DESTROYED BY COLLAPSING (OR SQUEEZING) ON THEMSELVES.
7. MORT - FROM THE ENGLISH, THE WHISTLING OF A HUNTING HORN THAT HERALDS THE DEATH OF THE HUNTED ANIMAL.

8. A FAMOUS MYERANIAN PROVERB - 'ONLY THE VICTORS GET ETERNAL PEACE.'

9. RIEN - FROM LATIN NOTHING. AGAIN THE ALLUSION IS MADE THAT THIS FLOWER TURNS EVERY MATERIAL OR IMMATERIAL THING INTO NOTHING AND MAKES IT DISAPPEAR. ON THE OTHER HAND, IT COMES FROM THE LATIN RES, WHICH MEANS 'THING, AFFAIR,' MAKING AN ALLUSION TO THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL AFFAIRS OF THE PLANET.

10. THE SEBURNAGIAN TYRPHAN, AN ANIMAL OF THE FAMILY OF THE MARHABEANS. SOMETHING BETWEEN A LAMB AND A LLAMA. WITH TASTY MEAT AND A RATHER NASTY TEMPER.

11. A PLAY ON WORDS - FROM THE GERMAN AUSLÄNDER MEANING FOREIGNER. HERE IT IS USED IN THE SENSE OF SOMEONE WHO IS FOREIGN TO SOMETHING.

12. ZERVILON - A NET-LIKE STRUCTURE ENCLOSING A MASSIVE FLEXIBLE SKELETON OF NANOMATERIAL. SOMETHING SIMILAR TO A HUGE TENT.

SYNOPSIS:

IN THE VERY DISTANT FUTURE, A FIERCE WAR IS BEING FOUGHT BETWEEN TWO SUPER-CITY-STATES, ENSARIAN AND IMGRADON, ON THE PLANET ZEGANDARIA OVER THE RESOURCES ZEGANDARIAN KEVLARITE AND INTERON FUEL. THE TWO CAMPS BEGIN THE CLASH LIGHTLY AS A JOKE WITH GOOD INTENTIONS MUCH LIKE CHILDREN, BUT FROM A MINOR DISPUTE AND LOCAL CONFLICT, IT QUICKLY GROWS AND SPREADS TO THE ENTIRE PLANET, AND LATER EVEN REACHES UNIVERSAL PROPORTIONS. MANY OTHER DISTANT PLANETS SUCH AS SEBUR NAG AND OSONIA ARE ALSO INVOLVED. GRADUALLY, ALL THE RACIAL, MORAL AND RELIGIOUS FAULTS IN THE VIEWS OF THE INHABITANTS OF THE PLANET BECOME APPARENT, WHO FOR SOME UNKNOWN REASON CANNOT COEXIST. TWO BRAVE TEAMS OF ADVENTURERS RACE AGAINST TIME IN THEIR ATTEMPT TO STOP OR AT LEAST REDUCE THE HOSTILITIES AND THE NEVER-ENDING FIRE OF HATRED TO BE EXTINGUISHED.

ALL TOO SOON IT BECOMES CLEAR THAT THE FURTHER HUMANITY'S TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES HAVE GONE, THE FURTHER BEHIND CONCEPTS LIKE FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE HAVE BEEN LEFT. EVEN NEWBORNS ARE IMPLANTED WITH MEMORIES SELECTIVELY, ACCORDING TO WHAT THEIR PARENTS WANT THEM TO BE.

BUT SOMEWHERE DEEP IN THE BOWELS OF THE PLANET LURKS A THIRD PLAYER. HE SEEMS ALMOST INVISIBLE, BUT HE LARGELY DETERMINES THE END AND THE DENOUEMENT OF THE WHOLE ARMAGEDDON. LITTLE PRINCESS MIERU IS ALSO THE MAIN VILLAIN'S DOOM.

THERE'S NO TIME TO WASTE, AND EVERY FEELING IS ALL TOO FLEETING - MOSTLY UNTIL SOME RANDOM PLASMA BLAST BLOWS YOUR SKULL OFF. AND DANGER LURKS AROUND EVERY CORNER.

MARK, SASIA, FATHER, RAT, GRANDPA JACK, SAM WALLACE, RUSSELL, DURNYAM, MIERU, ENNIO HAMMER, SERGEANT ZORIN, RODRIGO, DUOLORS, BECKY, MEIOR, HILDA, KENJI, NEOLA, KIER ZOH AND OTHERS REPRESENT THE VARIOUS CHARACTERS AND PERSPECTIVES ON



THE WHOLE CHANGED REALITY. NONE OF THEM ARE WHOLLY GOOD OR BAD, AND SOMETIMES THEY GET TO MAKE SOME PRETTY WEIRD DECISIONS.

AND, OF COURSE, THERE'S THE REDEMPTION MOMENT AT THE END. THE DIRTY SECRETS OF LABOR COLONY 206 AND THE EVIL DICTATOR ACUSTRO, WHO HAS IMPRISONED THE GREATEST SCIENTIFIC LUMINARIES ON THE PLANET, BECOME THE BASIS FOR A NEW BEGINNING. BECAUSE MAYBE EVERYONE'S BEEN A LITTLE GUILTY OF EVERYTHING THAT'S BEEN GOING ON.

AND THE ENDING IS SLIGHTLY UNEXPECTED. ONLY THE MOST MORAL SURVIVE, AND THOSE WHO HAVE FOLLOWED THEIR DESTINED PATH ALL ALONG. AND THE CULPRITS ARE PUNISHED! AND YET SOME OF THEM MAY BE FORGIVEN! AFTER THE FACT!